

川上 稔

イラスト・さとやす (TENKY)

GENESISシリーズ



境界線 上の ゾーン VI

中

か-5-45



GENESISシリーズ
境界線上のホライゾンⅥ(中)

川上
稔



電撃文庫



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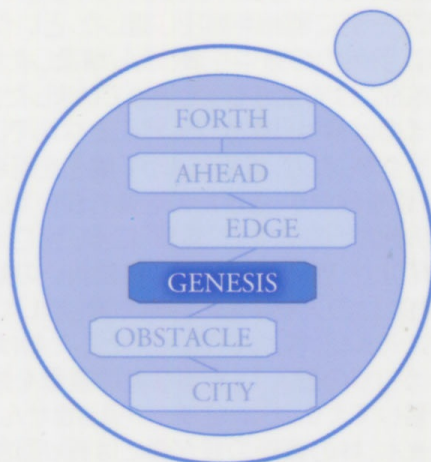


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The 1st.GENESIS

■最上・義光■

ヨシミツじゃなくてヨシアキ。

意外にあっさり間違えやすい名前ですな。

実は隠れファンが多い大名。

自分ら世代では大河ドラマ“伊達政宗”の影響で

悪人扱いのイメージがありますが、

実際は“家”と“家族”の狭間が常に弱点であり、

転機となる人だったりします。

身内への人情が濃かったんですね。

それというのも、元々は羽州を掌握していた家系だったのが、

先代あたりから雲行き怪しくなりまして、

そして義光の代で一気に羽州を制圧し直した、というのがあります。

その際、羽州内の連中を潰したり懐柔したりで。

最終的には安定をもって治めていましたが、

信頼できるのはやはり家族、ということなんでしょう。

駒姫の事件もそうでしたが、奸臣によって嫡子を暗殺された時は、

その奸臣を赦さず、逃げたのを連れ戻しています

（奸臣はその途中で“襲撃”により死亡）。

果敢な義光ですが、当時の記録では英雄扱いの記述が多く、

それだけの人物ゆえに謀略も通じました。

能力がある人に、皆、ついていこうとしたわけです。

また、かなりの歌人で、相当な数の連歌を残し、

研究書まで書いてます。ちょっとチート過ぎませんかね……。

そんな義光も、妹の義姫の我が儘には振り回されます。

勝てる伊達との戦を休戦されてみたりといろいろ。

家族愛に濃いところがホントに弱点というかキャラ立ち過ぎというか。

なお、駒姫については、後に大きな寺を作ったとき、

そこを供養の場として、彼女の居室をそのまま移築しています。

駒姫の生活を、供養の場に置くという、

これが義光の本当の姿なのだと思ったりですね。

デザインは「羽州の狐」として狐ベースのカーチャン。

あ、やっさんラフ無しで、自分のラフからそのまま立ち上げられてます。

実は「虎」とも呼ばれていたのですが、

景虎などと被るので、狐を優先としました。

扇が銃を兼ねるのは、義光が東日本では

大量の銃器を先進的に用意した人であったことと、連歌に由来します。

（川上稔）

Installation

installation



installation

Mogami Yoshiaki

It's Yoshiaki, not Yoshimitsu.

That's a pretty easy name to misread.

He is a daimyo with a lot of secret fans.

For my generation, it's easy to see him as a villain due to the influence of the Taiga Drama "Date Masamune", but he was someone who always had a weakness in the gap between "clan" and "family" and who found a turning point there.

He cared a lot about his family.

Also, his clan already held Ushuu, but things were looking iffier for the next generation, so Yoshiaki worked to regain control of Ushuu during his generation.

That involved crushing and winning over the people in Ushuu. He ultimately gained stability and ruled over them, but he must have only been able to trust his family.

Similar to the Komahime incident, when his heir was assassinated by a traitor, he could not allow that traitor to get away with it and had them brought back when they fled. (The traitor was killed in an "attack" during the process.)

Yoshiaki was decisive, but the contemporary records often speak of him as a hero. It was because he was such a great man that his schemes worked. People followed him because he was so capable.

He was also quite a poet, left behind a lot of *renga*, and even wrote a research book. He sounds a little too capable if you ask me...

But even Yoshiaki was powerless in the face of his younger sister Yoshihime's selfishness. She even had him call a truce in a battle against Date he could have won.

His familial love really was a weakness and feels like almost too strong a characterization.

As for Komahime, when Yoshiaki later had a large temple built, he had her

room moved there as-is as a memorial to her.

Using Komahime's daily life as a memorial to her feels to me like the best picture we have of who Yoshiaki really was.

For the design, I used the Fox of Ushuu title to make her a fox mom.

Oh, and there wasn't a Ya-san rough for her, so I built the character straight off of my own rough.

He was also known as a tiger, but since we already have Kagetora, I went with the fox.

I had her fan double as a gun because Yoshiaki was the one who prepared guns more than anyone else in eastern Japan and because of the *renga*.

(Kawakami Minoru)

**Kyoukai Senjou no Horizon - Horizon on the
Middle of Nowhere - 6B**



——さあ、決めていこう。

VI

中

川上 稔

イラスト・さとやす (TENKY)

—Now, let us make a decision

Characters



horizon
on the Middle
of Nowhere
episode.06



Festival Ad

M.H.R.R. 主催

ドキドキ

縁



開催!!

会場： 巴里郊外特設

出演決定?!

加藤 清正

福島 正則



■「出し物予定」

「安芸風極東ピザ」「えるえる」「英国ソース焼きそば」「追尾えるえる」「チョコレートパナーナ」「カーブえるえる」「綿花あめ」「不意えるえる」「南国パイン林檎飴」「誘導えるえる」等々。

たくさんあるよ!

HOME

Top: M.H.R.R. Sponsored Title: Heart Pounding Festival!!

In blue: Location: Special Facility Outside Paris Orange circle: Confirmed to Appear?!

Left Box: Katou Kiyomasa Right box: Fukushima Masanori Bottom box:

Planned Stands

“Aki-Style Far Eastern Pizza” “Ero Ero” “English Sauce Yakisoba” “Seeking Ero Ero” “Chocolaté Banahna” “Curving Ero Ero” “Cotton Wool Candy” “Surprise Ero Ero” “Candied Tropical Pineapple” “Guided Ero Ero” and more.

There will be lots to eat!

Far Eastern History

First of all

These people do not get started while at their best

They get started once their anger gets the best of them

Hopefully their way of life will be of some use

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Illustrations: Satoyasu (TENKY) Cover Design: Watanabe Kouichi (2725 Inc)
Book Design Concept: TENKY

Characters

● 武蔵

 <p>葵・喜美 トリーの姉でエロとダンスの神を信仰する。基本的に 高压で応用的に身勝手。</p>	 <p>葵・トリー 主人公。武蔵アリアダスト学院の総長兼生徒会長。 “不可能男”。</p>
 <p>浅間・智 武蔵の主社である浅間神社の娘。トリーや喜美の幼 馴染み兼人生の被害者。</p>	 <p>東 帝の子供で半神。能力など全て封じられて武蔵で生 活する。</p>
 <p>アデーレ・バルフェット 仏蘭西から流れてきた従士家系。眼鏡娘。</p>	 <p>伊藤・健児 快活なインキュバス。全裸で禿のマッスル系。通称仆 ケン。</p>
 <p>御広敷・銀二 ハート様系体格の食通でオタク。</p>	 <p>キヨナリ・ウルキアガ 第二特務。航空系半竜で異端審問官志望。通称ウ ッキー。</p>
 <p>シロジロ・ベルトーニ 会計。武蔵の商工会の若手幹部。</p>	 <p>点蔵・クロスユナイト 第一特務。いつも帽子などで顔を隠す忍者で使いっ 走り。</p>
 <p>トゥーサン・ネシンバラ 書記。歴史好きの作家志望者で同人作家。</p>	 <p>直政 第六特務。機関部で働く姉御。煙草はふかすわデカ い声で笑うわで。</p>
 <p>ネイト・ミツダイラ 第五特務。水戸松平の襲名者で騎士家系。人狼ハ ーフ。</p>	 <p>ネンジ HP3くらいのスライム。男らしい。</p>
 <p>ノリキ 家族を支える勤労少年。不器用型格闘家。無口で 無愛想。</p>	 <p>ハイディ・オーゲザヴァラー 会計補佐。シロジロのパートナーで白狐エリマキつき。</p>
 <p>ハッサン・フルブシ カルピスマーク系インド人。カレーだけ食って飲んで生 きてる。</p>	 <p>ペルソナ君 バケツヘルムの超マッチョ。無口で怪力で心優しい。</p>
 <p>ホライゾン・アリアダスト トリーの幼馴染みで現三河君主。現在自動人形中。 感情が大罪武装の部品として奪われている。</p>	 <p>本多・二代 元三河の学生。本多・忠勝の息女。自称拙者、御座 る語尾の濃い目。</p>
 <p>本多・正純 副会長。昨年度の三河からの真面目転入生。いろい ろ家庭の事情あり。</p>	 <p>マルガ・ナルゼ 第四特務。黒髪六枚翼の白魔術師。漫研所属。</p>
 <p>マルゴット・ナイト 第三特務。金髪六枚翼の黒魔術師。笑い顔の方。</p>	 <p>ミリアム・ポークウ 車椅子生活のため、在宅就学している少女。</p>
 <p>向井・鈴 目が見えないけど頑張る少女。皆のストッパー。</p>	 <p>立花・宗茂 元三征西班牙第一特務。アモーレ。現在は襲名解 除で再起願中。</p>
 <p>立花・閏 元三征西班牙第三特務。宗茂の嫁で砲撃系義腕 少女。五十回。</p>	 <p>メアリ・スチュアート 英国女王エリザベスの異母姉。金髪巨乳。点蔵の未 来嫁として同居中。王賜剣一型のオーナー。</p>
 <p>三科・大 機関部部長の孫娘。メカ好き。直政の後輩にあたる。“だい”じゃ なくて“ひろ”。</p>	 <p>三科・翔一 三科・大の父。泰造の義理の息子。関東IZUMOの長。</p>
 <p>里見・義康 里見教導院生徒会長の少女。小さくても泣かない。 武神“義”を操る。</p>	 <p>大久保・忠隣／長安 極東には珍しい二重襲名の代表委員長。二年。イン チキ関西弁。</p>

character

character

●教導院関係者



かのう
加納

太久保の侍女。自動人形。風紀委員長。二年。



だて しげ ざね (なるみ)
伊達・成実

政宗の従弟役。伊達家の副長で、機動殻”不転百足”を使用。余裕あり気味おねーさん風。



まき こ
オリオトライ・真喜子

高速戦闘型女教師。いつもジャージ。



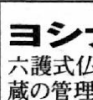
さかい ただ つぐ
酒井・忠次

武蔵アリアダスト学院学長。昔はかなり出来る人でしたが左遷。



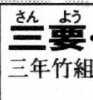
むさし
“武蔵”

武蔵を統括する自動人形で総艦長。辛辣口調がたまりません。



ヨシナオ

六護式仏蘭西から派遣された武蔵王。教導院への否決権と武蔵の管理権を持つ。



さん よう みつ き
三要・光紀

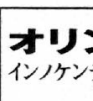
三年竹組の担任。オリオトライを先輩と仰ぐ。何か微妙に不幸。

●M.H.R.R.



はしば とう きち ろう
羽柴・藤吉郎

M.H.R.R.副会長、自動人形の猿面少女。おどおどボンバー系。



オリンピア

インノケンティウスの義姉にして義妹。現教皇総長。



マティアス

M.H.R.R.旧派の代表。総長兼生徒会長。傀儡楽しいです!



まえ だ とし いえ
前田・利家

旧派の代表。会計。霊体になっており、妻の“まつ”と日々平穏に中間職。



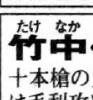
ふく しま まさ のり
福島・正則

羽柴麾下。十本槍のナンバー1。御座ります語尾を使用する。



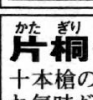
か とう きよ まさ
加藤・清正

羽柴麾下。十本槍のナンバー2。金髪巨乳系で丁寧口調。



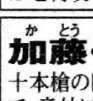
たけ なか はん べ え
竹中・半兵衛

十本槍の九番。羽柴の軍師。長寿族のお気楽姉さん。聖譜記述では毛利攻めの前に死亡するので、黒田・官兵衛も二重襲名。



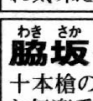
かた ぎり かつ もと
片桐・且元

十本槍の十番。真面目少年で交渉役などもこなす。かなり遊ばれ気味だけど気にせず男らしく頑張ります!



か とう よし あき
加藤・嘉明

十本槍の四番。金髪金翼の白魔術師。鋭い口調でものを言う一方で、意外に全体のまとめ役。



わき さか やす はる (アンジー)
脇坂・安治

十本槍の五番。黒髪黒翼の黒魔術師。お気楽系だが、本当にお気楽系。場の流れをパワーアップ。



はち す か こう ろく
蜂須賀・小六

ショーク。武神乗りで日溜玄武の搭乗者。十本槍でクール子供。



か に そう ぞう
可児・才蔵

名字読めない率超高め。元気者の十本槍補佐。福島の後輩にあたる。通称カニ玉。

●P.A.Oda



さつ さ なり まさ
佐々・成政

P.A.Oda六天魔軍、五大頂の一人。ヤンキー系で突撃派。でも几帳面。



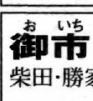
しば た かつ いえ
柴田・勝家

P.A.Oda六天魔軍、五大頂の一人。体育会系。最近結婚して困りもの。



ふ わ みつ はる
不破・光治

P.A.Odaの対上越露西亜現地会計。利家、成政と三人で“三人衆”と呼ばれる。



お いち
御市

柴田・勝家の妻。おっとり系パーサーカー。



もり なが よし
森・長可

P.A.Odaの中で最も雄度が高い好青年。インバクトの瞬間にヘッドが回る。



たき がわ いち ます
滝川・一益

築城や艦船操作に秀でたP.A.Odaの忍者武将。

character

伊達



伊達・政宗

伊達家の当主。竜神の力を受け継いでいる。伊達家の総長兼生徒会長でもある。



義姫

政宗の母。鬼型長寿族と人間のハーフ。仙台伊達教導院の学長。

片倉・小十郎

伊達家の副会長。テンション上下が激しいが選択式。

最上



最上・義光

「羽州の狐」と呼ばれる裏切り上等大名。極寒の最上を一代でまとめあげた辣腕。

鯉延

義光様のフォローをする走狗ですモン!

六護式仏蘭西



ルイ・エクシヴ

六護式仏蘭西総長。太陽王の爽やか好青年。神の血を引く。



毛利・輝元

六護式仏蘭西生徒会長。エクシヴの妻。ヤンキー系。将来、西軍の長として武蔵側の敵に回る運命。



三銃士のアンリ

戦闘系の女性型自動人形。リーダー格で、輝元の護衛役。制御式大刀の使い手。



三銃士のアルマン

戦闘系の男性型自動人形。広範囲重力制御の使い手。



人狼女王

デュレンヌ。六護式仏蘭西の副長。ミトツダイラの母ちゃん。かなり大雑把な巨乳。

ミトツダイラの父

人狼女王の旦那。幸せいっぱいであつた泣いてしまう被害者。受け身と言うより攻め込まれ派。二十四日。

ベルンハルト

M.H.R.R.出身の傭兵隊長だが改派として本国を裏切って転戦した人を襲名したオッサンだが中身は天竜で六護式仏蘭西側という複雑さ。

北条



北条・氏直

北条印度諸国連合の総長兼生徒会長。鬼型長寿族だが、自動人形の身体となっている。

小太郎

氏直についている少女忍者型の走狗。優秀なのだが子供扱い。

真田



真田・信之

真田の生徒会長兼総長。偉いんだか偉くないんだか解らないし強いんだか強くないんだか解らないけど長生きするタイプ。



真田・昌幸

信之のとーちゃん。真田教導院の学長。



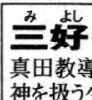
海野・六郎

真田教導院の十勇士の七番。踊り子の傾奇者。舞踏型の剣術をこなす。



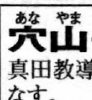
寛・十蔵

真田教導院の十勇士の十番。制御式の射撃術を用いる長身瘦躯。



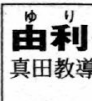
三好・伊佐

真田教導院の十勇士の四番。別名は伊佐入道。制御式の武神を扱う少女。



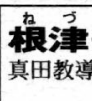
穴山・小助

真田教導院の十勇士の五番。人の良さそうな顔の男。忍術をこなす。



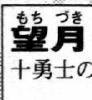
由利・鎌之介

真田教導院の十勇士の六番。剣術を得意とする。



根津・陣八

真田教導院の十勇士の八番。狙撃を得意とする。



望月・幸忠

十勇士の九番。自動人形で爆砕術式を扱う。

character

● Musashi

- Aoi Kimi: Toori's older sister and worshipper of the god of eroticism and dancing. Fundamentally high-tension and selfish in practice.
- Aoi Toori: Protagonist. Musashi Ariadust Academy's chancellor and student council president. Mr. Impossible.
- Asama Tomo: Daughter of the Asama Shrine, Musashi's main shrine. Childhood friend and overall victim of Toori and Kimi.
- Azuma: Child of the emperor and a half-god. All his abilities have been sealed and he lives on the Musashi.
- Adele Balfette: From a vassal family that arrived from France. Glasses girl.
- Itou Kenji: Cheerful incubus. Nude, bald, and muscular. Known as Itoken.
- Ohiroshiki Ginji: Gourmet otaku with a Heart-sama style build.
- Kiyonari Urquiaga: 2nd special duty officer. Flying half-dragon. Hopes to be an inquisitor. Known as Uqui.
- Shirojiro Bertoni: Treasurer. Young leading member of Musashi's commerce and industry guild.
- Tenzou Crossunite: 1st special duty officer. Ninja and errand-runner who always covers his face with his hat.
- Toussaint Neshinbara: Secretary. Loves history, wants to be an author, and writes doujins.
- Naomasa: 6th special duty officer. Older sister type who works in the engine division. Smokes and laughs loudly.
- Nate Mitotsudaira: 5th special duty officer. Member of a knight family and inheritor of the Mito Matsudaira name. Half werewolf.
- Nenji: Slime with about 3 HP. Manly.
- Noriki: Laborer boy who supports his family. Clumsy martial artist. Silent and unsociable.
- Heidi Augesvarer: Treasurer's aide. Shirojiro's partner. Has a white fox named Erimaki.
- Hassan Furubushi: Calpis logo-style Indian. Lives while eating and drinking only curry.
- Persona-kun: Super macho man with a bucket helmet. Silent, strong, and kindhearted.
- Horizon Ariadust: Toori's childhood friend and current ruler of Mikawa.

Currently an automaton. Her emotions were taken as parts for the Logismoi Oplo.

- Honda Futayo: Former Mikawa student. Honda Tadakatsu's daughter. Uses a strongly old-fashioned speech pattern.
- Honda Masazumi: Vice president of the student council. Diligent exchange student who arrived from Mikawa the previous year. Has various issues with her family.
- Malga Naruze: 4th special duty officer. Black-haired six-winged Weiss Hexen. Member of the manga club.
- Margot Naito: 3rd special duty officer. Blonde-haired six-winged Schwarz Hexen. Always smiling.
- Miriam Poqou: Girl who stays in her room because she lives in a wheelchair.
- Mukai Suzu: Blind but always gives it her all. Acts as everyone's stopper.
- Tachibana Muneshige: Former Tres España 1st special duty officer. Amore. Currently working to regain his inherited name.
- Tachibana Gin: Former Tres España 3rd special duty officer. Muneshige's wife and possessor of cannon-style false arms. Fifty times.
- Mary Stuart: Half-sister of English Queen Elizabeth. Well-endowed blonde. Living with Tenzou as his future wife. Owner of Ex. Collbrande.
- Mishina Hiro: Granddaughter of the engine division's chief. Loves mechanical things. Naomasa's underclassman. Her name is pronounced Hiro, not Dai.
- Mishina Shouichi: Mishina Hiro's father. Taizou's son-in-law. Head of Kantou IZUMO.
- Satomi Yoshiyasu: Satomi Academy's student council president. Small but does not cry. Uses the god of war Righteousness.
- Ookubo Tadachika/Nagayasu: A rare Far Easterner with a double inherited name. A second year and head of the representative committee. Speaks in a fake-sounding Kansai dialect.
- Kanou: Ookubo's maid. An automaton. Head of the public morals committee. A second year.
- Date Shigezane [Narumi]: Masamune's cousin. Vice chancellor of the Date clan and uses a mobile shell named Unturning Centipede. Confident

elder sister type.

● Academy Officials

- Oriotorai Makiko: High-speed battling teacher. Always wears a track suit.
- Sakai Tadatsugu: Musashi Ariadust Academy's president. Used to be a very able person but was demoted.
- "Musashi": Automaton that supervises the Musashi and overall commander. Her sharp comments are hard to put up with.
- Yoshinao: King of Musashi who was sent from Hexagone Française. Has a veto right toward the academy and has the authority to manage Musashi.
- Sanyou Mitsuki: Class 3-Bamboo's homeroom teacher. Looks up to Oriotorai. Somewhat sensitive and unlucky.

● M.H.R.R.

- Hashiba Toukichirou: M.H.R.R. Vice President and monkey-masked automaton girl. The nervous bomber type.
- Olimpia: Innocentius's older and younger stepsister. Current Pope-Chancellor.
- Matthias: Representative of M.H.R.R.'s Catholics. Student Council President. Younger brother of Chancellor and Emperor Rudolf II. Being a puppet is fun!
- Maeda Toshiie: Catholic representative. Treasurer. Samurai attendant that has become a ghost and is peacefully spending his days with his wife Matsu.
- Fukushima Masanori: Under Hashiba's direct command. Ten Spears #1. Speaks in an old-fashioned way.
- Katou Kiyomasa: Under Hashiba's direct command. Ten Spears #2. The busty blonde type and speaks politely.
- Takenaka Hanbei: Ten Spears #9. Hashiba's tactician. Carefree long-lived girl. Dies before the invasion of Mouri according to the Testament, but has also inherited the name of Kuroda Kanbei.
- Katagiri Katsumoto: Ten Spears #10. Diligent boy who fills the negotiator role among others. Used as a plaything a lot, but he won't let it get to him and will do his best like a man!

- Katou Yoshiaki: Ten Spears #4. Gold-haired, gold-winged Weiss Hexen. Speaks sharply, but surprisingly tends to act as a mediator.
- Wakisaka Yasuharu (Angie): Ten Spears #5. Black-haired, black-winged Schwarz Hexen. The carefree type, but she truly is carefree. She powers up the flow of things.
- Hachisuka Koroku: Shouroku. God of war pilot of the Hidamari Genbu. The cool kid of the Ten Spears.
- Kani Saizou: Extremely high probability of people misreading her name. The energetic aide to the Ten Spears. Fukushima's underclassman. Nickname: Kanitama.

● P.A. Oda

- Sassa Narimasa: One of P.A. Oda's Six Heavenly Demon Army and Five Great Peaks. Delinquent and assault type. But methodical.
- Shibata Katsuie: One of P.A. Oda's Six Heavenly Demon Army and Five Great Peaks. Athletic type. Very troublesome after his recent marriage.
- Fuwa Mitsuharu: P.A. Oda's local anti-Sviet Rus treasurer. Her, Toshiie, and Narimasa are known as the Triumvirate.
- Oichi: Shibata Katsuie's wife. Gentle berserker.
- Mori Nagayoshi: Manliest young fellow in P.A. Oda. His head spins at the instant of impact.
- Takigawa Ichimasu: P.A. Oda ninja commander who excels at castle building and ship operation.

● Date Clan

- Date Masamune: Head of the Date clan. Inherits the power of the Dragon God. Chancellor and student council president of the Date clan.
- Katakura Kojuurou: Vice president of the Date clan. Full of intense highs and lows.
- Yoshihime: Masamune's mother. Half demonic long-lived and half human. Principal of Sendai Date Academy.

● Mogami Clan

- Mogami Yoshiaki: Betrayal-loving daimyo known as the Fox of Ushuu. Shrewd leader who unified frigid Mogami in a single generation.
- Shakenobe: The Mouse that follows Yoshiaki-sama, mon!

● Hexagone Française

- Louis XIV: Hexagone Française's chancellor. Refreshing young man known as the Roi-Soleil. Has divine blood.
- Mouri Terumoto: Hexagone Française's student council president. Delinquent type. Destined to be Musashi's enemy as leader of the Western Army.
- Henri of the Three Musketeers: Female combat-style automaton. Acts as the leader and as Terumoto's bodyguard. Uses large remote-controlled swords.
- Armand of the Three Musketeers: Male combat-style automaton. Uses broad-range gravitational control.
- Reine de Garou: Turenne. Hexagone Française's vice chancellor. Mitotsudaira's mom. All-around giant breasts.
- Mitotsudaira's Father: The Reine des Garous's husband. A victim who is full of happiness and readily cries. Not so much passive as always under attack. 24 days.
- Bernard: A mercenary commander from M.H.R.R., but an old man who inherited the name of someone who betrayed his home nation as a Protestant and moved from battlefield to battlefield, but is actually a Celestial Dragon and siding with Hexagone Française. It's complicated.

● Houjou

- Houjou Ujinao: Chancellor and student council vice president of the Houjou Association of Indian States. A demonic long-lived, but has an automaton body.
- Kotarou: Ninja girl Mouse that accompanies Ujinao. Skilled but gets treated like a child.

● Sanada

- Sanada Nobuyuki: Sanada's Student Council President and Chancellor. Unclear if he's important or not and unclear if he's strong or not, but he is the type to live a long time.
- Sanada Masayuki: Nobuyuki's daddy. Principal of Sanada Academy.
- Unno Rokuro: Sanada Academy Ten Braves #7. Eccentric dancer. Uses a dancing style of swordplay.
- Kakei Juuzou: Sanada Academy Ten Braves #10. Tall skinny man who uses a remote-controlled shooting technique.
- Miyoshi Isa: Sanada Academy Ten Braves #4. AKA Isa Nyuudou. Girl who uses a remote-controlled god of war.
- Anayama Kosuke: Sanada Academy Ten Braves #5. Looks like a nice guy. Uses ninja techniques.
- Yuri Kamanosuke: Sanada Academy Ten Braves #6. Specializes in sword fighting.
- Nezu Jinpachi: Sanada Academy Ten Braves #8. Specializes in sniping.
- Mochizuki Yukitada: Ten Braves #9. Automaton who uses explosion spells.

Glossary

・御館の乱【おたてのらん】:上杉家内における謙信死後の跡目相続争い。上杉・景勝と長尾・景虎が争い、景勝が勝利した。

か行

- ・改易:お家取り潰しのこと。
- ・外燃拝氣:自分の外に蓄積された拝氣のこと。流体燃料などが該当。
- ・旧派【カトリック】:古くから存在するTsirhcの主流。
- ・行事:教導院が各学期中などにこなさなければいけない儀式や試験など学業を示す。これを遂行しなければ対外的政治行為などは行えない。
- ・教導院:学校施設のこと。実質上の政軍中心部。分校が多く存在する。
- ・教譜:神や聖譜を信奏する組織。集団。
- ・極東:重奏統合騒乱の後、神州をこう呼ぶ。
- ・K.P.A.Italia:安芸諸国連合+イタリア都市連合のこと。
- ・賢鉱石、賢水:流体を含んだ鉱石、水。流体燃料としても使用可能。
- ・校則法:聖連が取り決めた教導院間の基本法。

さ行

- ・暫定議会:武蔵において、生徒会や総長連合、委員会の官僚となる大人達の組織。
- ・清らか大市【サンメルカド】:三征西班牙のブランド。
- ・Shaja【シャージャー】:ムラサイ圏における“了解”の意。本来は勇気を示す語の表音。
- ・Jud.【ジャッジ/ジャッジメント】:咎人用の“応答”“了解”の意。
- ・重奏世界:かつて神州のコピーを置いた異空間のこと。地脈制御で保たれていた。
- ・重奏統合争乱:重奏世界が崩壊した際に生じた重奏世界側住人と現実世界側(神州)住人の戦争。重奏世界側が勝利して神州は暫定支配を受ける。
- ・重奏領域:落ちてきた重奏世界の神州が、砕けながら現実側に合一した箇所。
- ・襲名:歴史再現のために適格者が歴史上の人物を襲名すること。
- ・術式:流体を加工することで空間中に奇跡

あ行

- ・黒金侍【アイゼンリッター】:M.H.R.R.改派領邦の主企業。
- ・ArchsArt:“大属の芸術”。英国の主企業。
- ・安土城:P.A.Odaが有する巨大航空戦艦。
- ・尼子家:元IZUMOの地。毛利と六護式仏蘭西によって滅亡。
- ・天津乞神令教導院【あまつごいしんれいきょうどういん】:黎明の時代に存在した初期の教導院。学問の場というより、導きの前線基地だった。
- ・有明:関東IZUMOによる武蔵専用浮きドック。
- ・アルマダの海戦:英国と三征西班牙の間に生じた海戦。三征西班牙が英国上陸を画策したが壊滅する。
- ・出雲産業座(IZUMO):極東最大規模の企業座。極東の神社の総本山で武蔵の建造を担った企業。
- ・英国【イングランド】:浮遊島を用いており、極東の土地や大名を支配していない。
- ・ヴェストファーレン条約:三十年戦争などの講和条約。
- ・H.R.R.M.:“神聖騎士団鉄工会”。M.H.R.R.旧派領邦の主企業。
- ・女神万歳【エウロパ】:六護式仏蘭西の主企業。
- ・六護式仏蘭西【エグザゴンフランセーズ】:毛利家+フランスのこと。
- ・王賜剣【エクスカリバー】:一型と二型がある。
- ・ATELL:流体の最小単位。術式に使用する。
- ・見下し魔山【エーデルブロッケン】:魔術ブランド。本社所在不明。
- ・M.H.R.R.:羽柴家+神聖ローマ帝国のこと。
- ・七部六仙道【オアト】:中国の仙道を基礎とした教譜。
- ・奥州:東北地域のこと。東側を伊達家。西側を最上家が治める。
- ・奥州藤原(平泉):奥州の南側にある長寿族の隠れ里。
- ・大返し【おおかえし】:信長暗殺の際、毛利攻めを行っていた羽柴が全軍をとって返した。二〇〇キロほどの道のりを、十日弱で走破したムチャ行軍。

では禁止。

・**超祝福艦隊**:アルマダ海戦用の三征西班牙の艦隊。最新鋭艦で構成。

・**Tsirhc**:神の子を長に据えた教譜。聖譜を信奏する。

・**Tes.【テス／テストメント】**:“応答”“了解”の意。

・**通し道歌**:江戸時代に極東に発生する童謡の試作型。

・**三征西班牙【トレスエスパンア】**:大内、大友家+スペインのこと。ポルトガルも併合中。

な行

・**内燃拝気**:自分の中にため込んだ拝気のこと。

・**ノヴゴロド**:露西亜の西端の大商業都市。浮上都市だが、雷帝イヴァン四世の大粛清で死者の都市となった。

は行

・**拝気**:人間が一時間存在するために必要な流体。3600ATELL。術式の消費ATELL換算単位。

・**花園**:英国にて作られた人工末世研究用の空間。

・**範鋼**:清のブランド。頑丈だけどやや荒い。

・**P.A.Oda**:織田家+オスマン。

・**非衰退調律進行**:黎明の時代に起きた、聖譜や重奏世界を作った運動。

・**秀次事件**:羽柴の甥にして次代を任されようとしていた、秀次が、羽柴の怒りをかけて自害に追い込まれた事件。理由は不明で、連座によって側室の駒姫までもが自害することになる。

・**表示枠**:各教譜の基本加護を使用するための術式デバイス。

・**改派【プロテスタント】**:旧派腐敗からの脱却と時代に合わせたTsirhcの新流。

・**機械仕掛けの明星【フィーノアルバ】**:K.P.A.Italiaのブランド。発条式を売り物とする。

・**武家諸法度**:松平家が江戸幕府を興した後に発布する法律。武家のあり方を決めたが、一国一城や、跡継ぎ無い場合は改易など、中央集権化を進める内容。

・**武神**:人が同化して動く巨大な人型機械。

・**文禄の役**:羽柴の朝鮮侵攻。第一回目のこと。

・**白砂台座**:出雲産業座の神社系ブランド。

・**人工末世**:英国の“花園”に末世研究用で作られた地脈の歪みの圧縮。

・**神格武装**:通常の武装とは違い、特有の能力を持つ武装。

・**神州**:極東のかつての呼び方。

・**清武田**:中国と武田家の合一。

・**神道**:極東の教譜。極東の神々を信奏し、神奏術を用いる。

・**上越露西亞【スヴィエートルーシ】**:上杉家+露西亞のこと。

・**聖協**:聖譜協奏派。上越露西亞で独自発展した旧派。

・**聖術**:Tsirhc系の術式。旧派は聖譜や聖者関係、改派は聖譜のみから力を導く。

・**生徒会**:各教導院の内務、外務などを行う組織。

・**聖譜**:前地球時代の歴史を記した歴史書。七組+抄本がある。

・**聖譜記述**:聖譜の機能により、前地球時代の歴史が百年先まで自動更新される。が、一六四八年の記述を最後に更新が停止している。

・**聖譜顕装**:聖譜の持つ能力を転用するための武装。

・**精霊術**:意志を持った流体とも言える精霊に話し掛け、力を借りる原始的な術式。

・**聖連**:聖譜連盟。歴史再現を主導するための組織。

・**奏者**:各教譜の信徒。

・**総長連合**:総長を長に、各教導院の警備など、実働と指揮を行う組織。

・**卒業**:極東以外の国は無期限制限。極東は十八歳卒業制。

た行

・**代演**:術式発動に拝気を使用する代わりに、神の喜ぶものを奉納すること。

・**大罪武装**:人間の大罪をモチーフに作られた大量破壊武装。

・**ダンハイ**:教譜の一つ。輪廻転生を主軸としている。

・**地脈**:空間を構成する流体の流れる経路の内、太いもの。

・**地脈炉**:地脈から流体を抽出精製する炉。地脈の変異を起こしやすく、爆発すると数キロ範囲が消滅して不安定化するためTsirhc教譜

・**歴史再現**:聖譜記述を人々が再現して世界の流れを保つこと。

・**奉納**:神に、神の喜ぶものや内燃拌気を納めること。献納。

ま行

・**走狗【マウス】**:神道教譜と奏者の仲介をする霊獣型デバイス。他教譜では走徒とも言う。

・**魔術**:欧州で絶賛迫害中の民間術式。

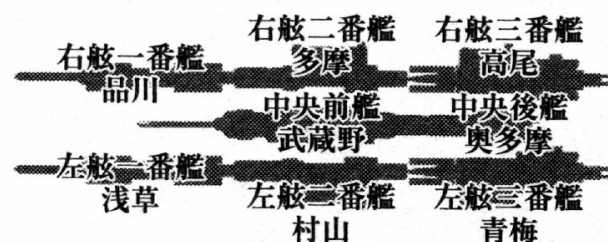
・**末世**:この世の終わり。聖譜の歴史記述が途切れる一六四八年のこと。

・**帝**:神格者、京にて神器による地脈制御を行っているとされる。俗世に関与しない。

・**三河**:元信公の地脈炉暴走崩壊で消滅。

・**水戸**:奥州の南、江戸の北。ミツダイラの所領地。

・**武蔵**:航空都市艦。極東に許された唯一の独立領土。



・**武蔵アリアダスト学院**:武蔵上、奥多摩に存在する極東の代表校。

・**矛盾許容**:この世界の基礎能。あらゆる物理法則の同時存在を叶える。

・**ムラサイ**:Tsirhcとは別に聖譜を信奏する後発派。

ら行

・**竜属**:竜のこと。精霊系の天竜と、獣系の地竜がいて、天竜を上位とする。ゲルマン侵攻の歴史再現で覇を唱えたものの、敗北。今は各地に散っている。

・**流体**:矛盾許容型の空間構成要素。

・**流体燃料**:燃料として精製された流体。外燃拌気や、流体駆動器に用いられる。

・**流体駆動器**:流体の空間変異力を用いた駆動器。効果は内部の紋章などによって変化する。

・**流体炉**:空間から流体を抽出精製する炉。地脈炉より出力は低いが比較的安全。

・**竜脈炉**:莫大量の流体を爆発させ、半径数キロを消滅させる爆弾。羽柴が有する。

・**黎明の時代**:聖譜成立以前の時代のこと。

A

- Academy: An educational facility. Used as the center of political and military power. Tend to have many branch schools.
- Academy Rules: The basic laws upheld between academies. Agreed to by the Testament Union.
- Age of Dawn: The age before the Testament was established.
- Amako clan: Former IZUMO land. Destroyed by Mouri and Hexagone Française.
- Anti-Delay Pro-Tuning: The action taken during the Age of Dawn that led to the creation of the Testament and Harmonic World.
- Apocalypse: The end of the world. 1648 when the Testament's history descriptions end.
- ArchsArt: England's primary corporation.
- Ariake: Floating dock for the Musashi provided by Kantou IZUMO.
- Armada battle: A naval battle fought between England and Tres España. Tres España planned to land on England but their fleet was destroyed.
- Artificial Apocalypse: A compressed ley line distortion created in England's Avalon to research the Apocalypse.
- ATELL: The smallest unit of ether. Used for spells.
- Avalon: A space created in England to research the artificial Apocalypse.
- Azuchi Castle: P.A. Oda's giant aerial warship.

B

- Blessings: The amount of ether needed for a human to exist for one hour. 3600 ATELL. Conversion unit for a spell's ATELL consumption.
- Bunroku Campaign: Hashiba's invasion of Korea. The first one.

C

- Catholic: The old mainstream version of Tsrhc.
- Chancellor's Officers: An organization led by the chancellor which leads the academy and performs work such as defense.
- Change of Rank: Having one's clan taken away.
- Contradiction Allowance: The foundational ability of the world. Allows the simultaneous existence of all sorts of physical laws.

D

- Divine States: Former name of the Far East.
- Divine Weapon: A weapon that, unlike a normal weapon, has a unique ability.
- Divinely Ordained Prayer Academies: The original academies that existed during the Age of Dawn. More a guiding frontline base than a place of learning.
- Dragon Line Reactor: A bomb that uses a runaway ley line reactor to destroy a wide area.
- Dragon Races: The dragons. There are Celestial Dragons which are spirits and Terrestrial Dragons which are beasts and the Celestial Dragons are of a higher level. They dominated during the history recreation of the Germanic invasions, but ultimately lost. They are now scattered across the land.
- Dunhi: A religion. Focused on reincarnation.

E

- Edel Brocken: Magic brand. Location of headquarters unknown.
- Eisenritter: Primary corporation of M.H.R.R.'s Protestant principalities.
- Emperor: A divine individual who is said to control the ley lines using the Imperial Regalia in Kyou. Does not interfere with the world.
- England: Uses a floating island and does not control any Far Eastern land or Far Eastern daimyo.
- Ether: Component that makes up contradiction-allowing space.
- Ether Engine: An engine that uses ether's space-altering ability. The effect changes based on the internal crest.
- Ether Fuel: Ether that has been purified into fuel. Used as External Blessings or for ether engines.
- Ether Reactor: A reactor that extracts and purifies ether from the air. Has a lower output than a ley line reactor, but is relatively safe.
- Europa: Hexagone Française's primary corporation.
- Excalibur: Has a first and second version.
- External Blessings: Blessings accumulated outside of oneself. Ether fuel is an example.

F

- Fan Gang: Qing brand. Durable but a bit rough.
- Far East: Name of the Divine States after the Harmonic Unification War.
- Fino Alba: K.P.A. Italian brand. Their use of springs is their selling point.

G

- God of War: A giant humanoid machine that people combine with to move.
- Graduation: No limit for nations other than the Far East. Far Easterners must graduate at 18.
- Grande y Felicísima Armada: Tres España's fleet for the Armada battle. Made up of cutting-edge ships.
- Great Return: When Hashiba returned with all his troops while attacking Mouri during Nobunaga's assassination. The rushed march covered about 200 km in less than ten days.

H

- Harmonic Territory: Locations where the fallen Harmonic World Divine States unified with the real world while breaking apart.
- Harmonic Unification War: A war between the harmonic world residents and the real world (Divine States) residents after the destruction of the harmonic world. The harmonic world residents won and began a provisional rule over the Divine States.
- Harmonic World: A former alternate space that copied the Divine States. Preserved through ley line control.
- Hexagone Française: Mouri clan + France.
- Hidetsugu Incident: Hidetsugu, Hashiba's nephew who was going to be left in charge during the next generation, earned Hashiba's anger and was forced to commit suicide. The reason is unknown, but his concubine Komahime had to commit suicide with him.
- History Recreation: Recreating the Testament descriptions to maintain the path the world takes.
- Holy Spells: Tsirhc spells. The Catholics are related to the Testament and holy individuals while the Protestants derive power only from the Testament.
- H.R.R.M.: Holy Knights Ironworks Guild. Primary corporation of M.H.R.R.'s Catholic principalities.

I

- Inherited Name: The name of a historical figure given to an appropriate individual for the history recreation.
- Internal Blessings: blessings stored within oneself.
- IZUMO: The Far East's largest corporation. The headquarters for Far Eastern shrines and the corporation that built the Musashi.

J

- Judge/Judgment: Means “understood”. Used by criminals.

K

- K.P.A. Italia: Association of Aki States + Union of Italian City States.

L

- Laws for the Samurai Clans: Laws established after the Matsudaira clan established the Edo Shogunate. It determined the status of the samurai clans, but it centralized power by declaring a 'Change of Rank' if a clan or castle had no heir.
- Ley Line: The thicker of the pathways through which ether flows.
- Ley Line Reactor: A reactor that extracts and refines ether from ley lines. Can easily cause ley line mutations and destroy everything within several kilometers if they explode. Due to their instability, they are banned by the Tsirhc religion.
- Logismo Oplo: Weapons of mass destruction created on the motif of the seven deadly sins.

M

- Magic: Folk spells currently under persecution in Europe.
- M.H.R.R.: Hashiba clan + Holy Roman Empires.
- Mikawa: Destroyed by the collapse of Lord Motonobu's ley line reactor.
- Mito: South of Oushuu and north of Edo. Mitotsudaira's territory.
- Mlasi: A later non-Tsirhc religion that also worships the Testament.
- Mouse: A spirit beast device to act as an intermediary between the Shinto religion and its musicians. Other religions use different names.
- Musashi: Aerial city ship. The sole independent territory allowed for the Far East.

[First Starboard Ship – Shinagawa/Second Starboard Ship – Tama/Third Starboard Ship – Takao/First Central Ship – Musashino/Back Central Ship – Okutama/First Port Ship – Asakusa/Second Port Ship – Murayama/Third Port Ship – Oume]

- Musashi Ariadust Academy: The Far East's representative academy which exists on Okutama of Musashi.
- Musician: A religion's worshiper.

N

- Novgorod: A large trade city on the western end of Russia. It is a floating city, but became a city of the dead after Ivan IV the Terrible's purge.

O

- Oat: A religion based on China's sages.
- Offering: Providing a god with something they will enjoy or Internal Blessings.
- Official Events: Refers to the ceremonies, exams, *etc.* that an academy must complete during each term. If these are not completed, the academy may not take part in any external politics.
- Orei Metallo/Nero: Ore or water containing ether. Can be used as ether fuel.
- Orthodox: The Orthodox Concerto religion. Sviet Rus's unique branch of Catholicism.
- Oushuu: The Tohoku region. The Date clan rules the east and the Mogami clan rules the west.
- Oushuu Fujiwara (Hiraizumi): A hidden village of the long-lived in southern Oushuu.

P

- P.A. Oda: Oda clan + Ottomans.
- Peace of Westphalia: The peace treaty that ended the Thirty Years' War.
- Protestant: A new style of Tsirhc created to escape the corruption of Catholicism and to adjust to the new age.
- Provisional Council: Group of adults who act as bureaucrats toward Musashi's student council, chancellor's officers, and student committees.

Q

- Qing-Takeda: Combination of China and the Takeda clan.

R

- Religion: Organizations or groups that worship a god or the Testament.

S

- San Mercado: Tres Españan brand.
- Shaja: Used in Mlasi regions and means “understood”. Originally meant “courage”.
- Shinto: Far Eastern religion. Worships the Far Eastern gods and uses divine music spells.
- Shirasago Enterprises: IZUMO’s shrine brand.
- Siege of Otate: Conflict over the succession of the Uesugi clan after Kenshin’s death. Uesugi Kagekatsu and Nagao Kageatora fought and Kagekatsu won.
- Sign Frame: Spell device needed to use each religion’s basic protection.
- Song of Passage: Prototype of a fairy tale created in the Far East during the Edo period.
- Spell: Causing a miracle in a certain space by processing ether.
- Spirit Spell: Primitive spells used by talking to and borrowing the power of spirits, which are ether with a will of its own.
- Student Council: The organization that handles an academy’s domestic and foreign affairs.
- Substitution: Offering something to please a god instead of using Blessings to activate a spell.
- Sviet Rus: Uesugi clan + Russia.

T

- Tes/Testament: Means “understood”.
- Testament: A history book that provides the history of the earth’s previous age. There are seven pairs and excerpts.
- Testament Descriptions: History of the earth’s previous age that is automatically updated by the Testament. However, it stopped updating after the description for 1648.
- Testament Union: An organization meant to lead the history recreation.
- Testamenta Arma: Weapons that use the ability of the Testaments.
- Tres España: Oouchi and Ootomo clans + Spain. Currently includes Portugal.
- Tsrhc: A religion which places the Son of God at the top. Worships the Testament.

World

●チャット実況通神呼び名一覧●

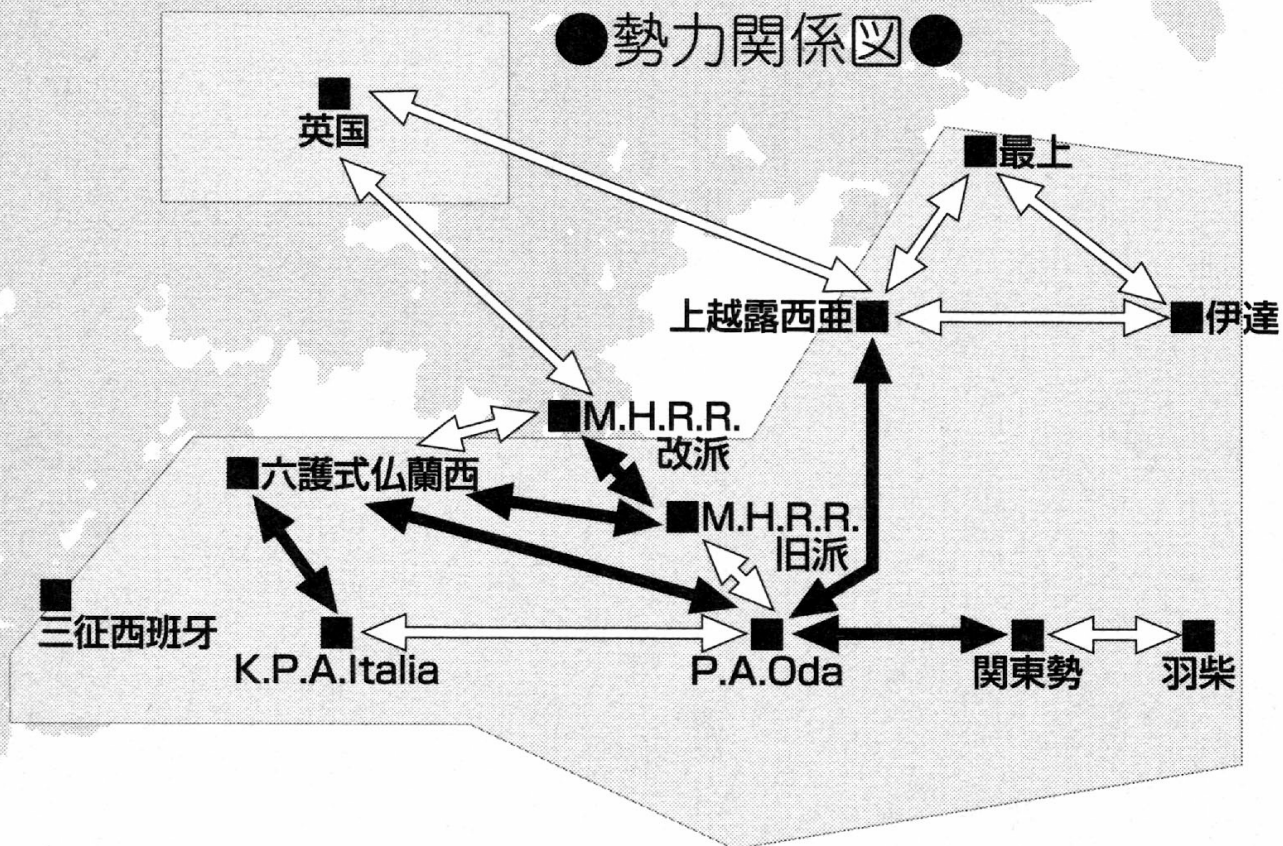
- ・あずま：東
- ・あさま：浅間・智
- ・いんび：伊藤・健児（イトケン）
- ・俺：葵・トーリ
- ・金マル：マルゴット・ナイト
- ・義：里見・義康
- ・傷有り：メアリ・スチュアート
- ・銀狼：ネイト・ミトツダイラ
- ・現役娘：人狼女王
- ・賢姉様：葵・喜美
- ・481：三科・翔一
- ・立花夫：立花・宗茂
- ・立花嫁：立花・闇
- ・煙草女：直政
- ・十ZO：点蔵・クロスユナイト
- ・蜻蛉切：本多・二代
- ・粘着王：ネンジ
- ・83：ハッサン・フルブシ
- ・貧従士：アデーレ・バルフェット
- ・副会長：本多・正純
- ・ベル：向井・鈴
- ・ホラ子：ホライゾン・アリアダスト
- ・●画：マルガ・ナルゼ
- ・○ペ屋：ハイディ・オーゲザヴァラー
- ・347：三科・大
- ・未熟者：トゥーサン・ネシンバラ
- ・武蔵王：ヨシナオ
- ・眼鏡：シェイクスピア
- ・礼賛者：御広敷・銀二
- ・労働者：ノリキ
- ・不退転：伊達・成実
- ・景綱君：片倉・小十郎
- ・牙：鬼庭・綱元
- ・留守居：留守・政景
- ・三立申：滝川・一益
- ・大先輩：柴田・勝家
- ・お12：御市
- ・百合花：佐々・成政
- ・お前田：前田・利家
- ・ふわあ：不破・光治
- ・モリー：森・長可
- ・九尾娘：最上・義光
- ・繁子：本庄・繁長
- ・かげV：上杉・景勝
- ・朝の部：斉藤・朝信
- ・長安定：大久保・忠隣
- ・CAN：加納
- ・しとお：福島・正則
- ・巨正：加藤・清正
- ・□□凸：片桐・且元
- ・黒竹：竹中・半兵衛
- ・きめえ：加藤・嘉明
- ・AnG：脇坂・安治
- ・6：蜂須賀・小六
- ・杏里：アンリ
- ・ある男：アルマン

簡易あらすじ

ふふ、つまり、あれですわね。私の見たところ、前回はずちのネイトと浅間神社代表が自分達の大事な相手との関係をぐっちょぐっちょに深めて真っ赤になったり一つ屋根の下で一緒に寝たり、私も二本ほど胸に挟んだりして、そこに武蔵の姫も姉も交えて一晩を明かして匂いをかきまわったりしたんです。そして昼からは濡れた身でこうぎの交渉。ええ、こうぎの交渉ですよ？ お肉の棒を喉に出し入れすると美味しいですの。——で、武蔵が毛利と北条とこうぎの交渉をしていたら、羽柴のナンタラさんが「俺ビョーキなんだ!」って乗り込んできましたの。間違ったこと言ってませんわよね？



●勢力関係図●



■極東（武蔵）

- 三征西班牙
- K.P.A. Italia
- 英国
- M.H.R.R. 改派
- M.H.R.R. 旧派
- 六護式仏蘭西
- P.A. Oda
- 関東勢
- 伊達
- 上越露西亞
- 最上

⇄ 協働
→ 敵対

無矢印は放置
または緩い警戒

●武蔵の今後●



「姉ちゃん! 姉ちゃん! これから武蔵はどーすんだ!?!」



「とりあえず関東開放が目標だけど、その前に小田原征伐の相対戦についてまとめないとね。何回戦するのか、とか、誰を出すか、とか。他勢力も加わるからちょっと面倒な話合いになるわよ?」

The Story So Far: Heh heh. So this is how it is. From what I saw last time, my Nate and the Asama Shrine Representative are blushing as they deepen their relationship with the person they have feelings for and sleep under the same roof as him. Musashi's princess and his sister were also there and I sniffed all over him after that night was over. And during the day, we discussed oral techniques. Yes, oral techniques. Where you move a meat stick in and out of your throat and it is ever so delicious. ...Then when Musashi was beginning a different sort of oral technique with Mouri and Houjou, someone from Hashiba boarded their ship and shouted, "I'm sick!" Just to be clear, nothing I said was inaccurate.

Divine Chat Screenname List:

- Azuma: Azuma
- Asama: Asama Tomo
- Obscene: Itou Kenji (Itoken)
- Me: Aoi Toori
- Gold Mar: Margot Naito
- Righteousness: Satomi Yoshiyasu
- Scarred: Mary Stuart
- Silver Wolf: Nate Mitosudaira
- Still Got It: Reine des Garous
- Wise Sister: Aoi Kimi
- 481: Mishina Shouichi
- Tachibana Husband: Tachibana Muneshige
- Tachibana Wife: Tachibana Gin
- Smoking Girl: Naomasa
- 10ZO: Tenzou Crossunite
- Tonbokiri: Honda Futayo
- Sticky King: Nenji
- 83: Hassan Furubushi
- Flat Vassal: Adele Balfette
- Vice President: Honda Masazumi

- Bell: Mukai Suzu
- Hori-ko: Horizon Ariadust
- Mal-Ga: Malga Naruze
- Marube-ya: Heidi Augesvarer
- 847: Mishina Hiro
- Novice: Toussaint Neshinbara
- Musashi King: Yoshinao
- Four Eyes: Shakespeare
- Worshipper: Ohiroshiki Ginji
- Laborer: Noriki
- Unturning: Date Narumi
- Kagetsuna-kun: Katakura Kojuurou
- Fang: Oniniwa Tsunamoto
- Caretaker: Rusu Makikage
- Taki: Takigawa Ichimasu
- Great Upperclassmen: Shibata Katsuie
- O12: Oichi
- Lily Flower: Sassa Narimasa
- Omaeda: Maeda Toshiie
- Fuwaa: Fuwa Mitsuharu
- Mory: Mori Nagayoshi
- Nine Tail Girl: Mogami Yosahiaki
- Shigeko: Honjou Shigenaga
- KageV: Uesugi Kagekatsu
- Tomo-no-Bu: Saitou Tomonobu
- Nagaya-Stable: Ookubo Tadachika
- CAN: Kanou
- Llaf: Fukushima Masanori
- Kiyo-Massive: Katou Kiyomasa
- □□凸: Katagiri Katsumoto
- Kuro-Take: Takenaka Hanbei
- Kimee: Katou Yoshiaki
- AnG: Wakisaka Yasuharu
- 6: Hachisuka Koroku

- An-Ri: Henri
- Ar-Man: Armand

Far Eastern Powers: [Same map as in 3-A.]

Relationships Between the Major Powers: [Same as 4-A]

Musashi's Plans:

Toori: Sis! Sis! What's Musashi going to do now!?

Kimi: Our goal seems to be liberating Kantou, but we first need to put together a plan for the Siege of Odawara's duels. Like how many duels there will be and who we will have fight in them. This discussion could be a pain with those other nations involved, you know?

School Rules

Article 221

- Based on Article 10, when a war or any other action that will wear down a nation's power coincides with an emergency or a planned history recreation, it is possible to replace it with duels by representatives to avoid the possibility of inadequate personnel or preparation.

Chapter 22: Justice Bringer in the Open Heights

第二十二章

『露天高所の正義者』

何処から来て
何処へ行くのか
配点（意思の行き先）



Where did you come from?

Where are you going?

Point Allocation (The Destination of Your Will)

Light split in the wind.

On a long deck floating in the blue sky, light would burst at set intervals.

The shattering objects on the Mouri diplomatic ship were barrier sign frames that gathered on a certain point.

There was also noise. A great downwards din rang from the center of the shattering barriers.

They were footsteps. The pace was leisurely, but they were so loud it sounded like they would break through the deck.

The shattering barriers moved forward with the footsteps.

The barriers clung to something as it broke through them and continued forward.

It was walking.

Or was it trying to run but slowed to a walk?

Either way, the footsteps made definite progress while sounding like those of someone climbing a mountain.

The barriers shattered and turned to spray, like they were being tossed aside by the footsteps.

A noise much like shattering brass instruments scattered through the air in the footsteps' wake.

And another sound joined those.

It was an alarm.

A female voice joined the continuous blaring of a whistle.

"An enemy has appeared on the upper deck! Bodyguards, secure and evacuate the diplomats! Rear guard, return fire on the enemy!"

The barrier was broken.

The barrier that appeared to take its place was also destroyed.

As the light repeatedly shattered and dispersed, a figure walked through the center of it all.

"The enemy is Hashiba's Ootani Yoshitsugu! He is Special Duty Officer class!"

Masazumi was protected along with Terumoto.

Mouri-01, who had stood by Terumoto's side, walked around the negotiation table and stood in front of her.

...Is she fighting back?

No. She held a hand toward Masazumi, and...

"Fall back! ...Princess!"

"Yeah, I've got it."

Terumoto grabbed the nearby idiot by the collar, tossed him backwards, and turned back toward Masazumi.

"Let's fall back."

"Hey, hey, Asama," said the idiot. "What is that? Is it history's first whatever-it-is?"

"Yes. It is definitely an ether lifeform, but my scans indicate it is a pseudo-program. The mold and everything else are artificial, so it seems to be an artificial personality created by programizing ether."

Despite their frantic movement, Horizon held a pot of tea as she asked Asama a question.

"So is it something like an automaton made of ether?"

"It has a personality, so whether it counts as an automaton or not would depend on whether it has a 'core' to act as a soul. If even that was created artificially, then it would be history's first data entity automaton."

Masazumi did not understand at all.

Vice President: "What does that mean?"

Asama: "Um, to put it simply, he's a doll. Mouri-01-san and the others protecting us here are physical dolls, but that Ootani Whatever-san is a data doll made from ether."

Vice President: "Data...made from ether?"

Wise Sister: "It's the difference between your real wife and your wife in a porn game! Now do you get it!? You can brag about a real wife, she'll do things for you, and you can do plenty of lewd things with her, but you can't brag about a porn game wife, other people can complete her route too, and the lewd is self-service! It's an important difference! Got that?"

Vice President: "No!"

10ZO: "In the past, I would have responded to Kimi-dono only for her to say something 100 times worse back, but now I actually agree with her..."

Mal-Ga: "Are you saying you do plenty of lewd things with Mary?"

In a blue Far Eastern summer uniform, Mary found Tenzou on Musashino's deck.

She held a paper cup in each hand.

"Here, Master Tenzou. I bought us some drinks. You like the watermelon candy kind, right?"

"Oh, j-judge! You didn't need to do that!"

"It was nothing, Master Tenzou. And you're on the job by keeping an eye on things up above, aren't you? But why does everyone look so concerned?"

"Yes, that," said the two Techohexen equipped with Scharz Fräulein and Weiss Fräulein.

Of the white and black, Naruze asked Mary a question.

"Tenzou just said he does plenty of lewd things with you."

"Why would you tell her thaaaaat!?"

Tenzou shouted at the Technohexen and Mary said "my" and placed a hand on her cheek.

She smiled and started to say something, but then she blushed.

"Like I said during the Battle of Kanagawa, I'm fine with a lewd ninja as long as it's Master Tenzou," she said. "Also, it makes me proud as a woman that he is viewing that side of me as well. It means he likes me on the outside and not just on the inside. And in a way, the outside is simpler to alter than the inside, so I can kind of cheat there."

"Cheat? What do you mean, Ma-yan?"

"Judge. I can use makeup."

Smoking Girl: "Tenzou, you haven't been giving Mary a life that sends her to the samples corner, have you?"

Flat Vassal: "It's unusual for the 6th Special Duty Officer to get involved in these discussions!"

10ZO: "Up above! There's a bit of an emergency underway up above!"

Scarred: "Oh, I-I'm sorry, Master Tenzou. You're trying to work, aren't you?"

Almost Everyone: "Tenzou's bullying her...!"

10ZO: "How could you possibly reach that conclusion!?"

"That's just how we do things," typed Mitotsudaira as she moved away from her king.

She did so to protect that king and the others.

She moved behind Mouri-01. That placed her across the table from Ootani.

They were on Mouri's diplomatic ship, so she courteously allowed Mouri-01 to lead the defense.

But that automaton's top priority would be Terumoto.

While falling back, Mouri-01 entered a quick command into a *signe cadre*. And as her light footsteps sounded on the deck...

"I am supplying a new barrier!"

It was a Holy Spell. A long, narrow *signe cadre* that resembled a spear pierced Ootani vertically. In quick succession, 16 of those cross shapes stabbed down with audible striking sounds. They pierced not just through Ootani's torso but from his shoulders to his sides, from his upper arms to his elbows, and from his thighs to his knees.

"I have restrained his joints!"

Mitotsudaira saw Ootani stop moving beyond the table.

...*Did she restrain him!?*

The question in her heart was soon answered.

"This is entirely meaningless. I know how to respond to most all of it."

All of the *signe cadres* shattered.

16 lights scattered through the air after the *signe cadres* piercing Ootani were destroyed.

A large movement of his had done it.

The warrior made of light had taken a pose for running toward them instead of just walking.

A new *signe cadre* dropped from overhead to pierce Ootani once more. The cross-shaped barrier accelerated down instead of simply dropping and he responded by further lowering his preparatory stance.

...*Here he comes!*

Beyond the table, Ootani was attempting to use his brief moment of freedom to race forward.

But then Mitotsudaira saw Mouri-01 move.

While falling back such that she covered for Mitotsudaira, she used a long step to lower her hips.

She had turned to the side with her left knee forward.

She slid back a bit and took a seated firing pose.

Mitotsudaira realized she was unarmed, but...

...She's going to produce a gun, isn't she!?

Automatons could launch or fire bullets with their gravitational control.

According to the records, the Honda family's Kazuno had used her gravitational control to fire cannons and wield swords during the Battle of Mikawa.

Now, metal components spilled from the inside of Mouri-01's skirt.

They were the parts to a rapid-fire matchlock pistol.

There were multiple rapid-fire mechanisms and chambers among the pieces she sent individually into the air.

And while she sat in preparation and swung her hand out...

"———"

The components came together in an instant, like they were being pulled into place by strings.

They fit together with the sound of lightly vibrating metal.

And Mitotsudaira heard a voice. It was Mouri-01's and it was used to confirm her enemy.

"Master Ootani Yoshitsugu," she said. "According to the Testament, you are one of Hashiba's great commanders and a Ministry of Justice official in charge of trials and executions. The fear brought by that role gave you the Urban Name 'Slayer of a Thousand'. ...You have a close friendship with Ishida Mitsunari and fight fiercely for the Western Army at Sekigahara," said Mouri-01. "But after the betrayal of an ally, you are surrounded and your forces obliterated. You ultimately commit suicide on the battlefield."

Mitotsudaira thought about what she said.

...Isn't that going to be a really short career?

Mitotsudaira reminded herself they had just held a meeting with Mouri and Houjou.

As a result, they would be fighting the Siege of Odawara, the Tensho Jingo Conflict, and the Siege of Bitchu Takamatsu Castle. It also looked like they would be fighting the Keichou Campaign against Hashiba's forces.

If they completed the history recreation to that point, they would be in striking distance of the Honnouji Incident, in which Nobunaga was assassinated, and the Battle of Sekigahara, which occurred after Hashiba's death.

Sekigahara was not that far off.

And yet *here* they had a combat data entity that would see his end at Sekigahara.

...My king.

Mitotsudaira glanced over to see her king looking at Ootani.

He squinted a bit and scratched his head at what Mouri-01 had said.

He looked somewhat displeased, or like he could not accept something. That filled Mitotsudaira with relief. Part of her thought he was being too kind to an enemy, but that was best for their king.

It was her duty to protect that kindness.

Yes, she thought. *It might be inappropriate to look at it like this, but I'm closest to him right now and he needs me more than anyone at times like this.* So...

"...!"

She saw attacks intersect before her eyes.

Mouri-01 and Ootani faced each other across the table.

The first to move was Mouri-01 as she crouched down and fired below the table.

Ootani responded by diving below the table.

...That's crazy!

He was moving toward the bullets.

But he had already swung his blade.

The sword at his hip was made of light, and...

"It's growing...!?"

It clearly grew.

As he swung the blade with a snap of his elbow, it extended to about 5 meters.

The sword was made of the same bluish-white light as his body and it sliced through the table's legs. Specifically, the two on Mouri-01's side.

Ootani placed a hand on the other end of the table.

He had the momentum of his run, so this slammed the legless side of the table diagonally against the floor.

From Mitotsudaira's side, the table looked like a ramp and light burst from its surface.

That was Mouri-01's bullets. They had anti-ghost spells applied and they were deflected by the slant of the thick table.

The sound of a hammer on wood sounded six times, but it accomplished nothing.

Mouri-01 raised her gun and looked back toward Mitotsudaira.

"This is the problem with bringing along valuable items."

"True enough."

Mitotsudaira replied, but the battle continued.

The momentum of the table's collapse sent it sliding along the deck.

Then barrier *signe cadres* dropped from the sky and pierced the table.

It was an anti-ghost barrier, so it had no effect on physical objects. It would have an effect on Ootani who was below the table and pushing it toward them, but...

"...!"

Seven of the barrier spears shattered.

But the other nine remained in the table. They had not shattered.

Asama: "The auto-targeting somewhat missed because he was hiding below the table!"

The nine crosses had their minimum altitude set at the deck and they all approached Mitotsudaira and Mouri-01 while shaking from the table's movements.

Hori-ko: "Our anti-ghost attacks don't work on him, but he can interact with physical objects? Isn't that cheating?"

Novice: "Well, Ootani Yoshitsugu has always seemed pretty overpowered, so it's kind of unavoidable."

Vice President: "That's not what I want to hear when he's chasing after me!"

Imagine what it's like on the front line.

Just then, the accelerating table gained an even larger speed boost.

Mitotsudaira knew what that had to mean.

...Did he kick the table!?

Mitotsudaira did not know how strong a data entity would be. In fact, no one here did.

But if he could push that heavy table, build up its speed, and kick it away, his strength far surpassed that of a human.

And Ootani came into view once more.

A warrior decorated with wrapped paper stood beyond the table.

His body was leaning horizontally after unleashing a sideways kick. He had swung his arms to keep his balance.

The accelerated table was a counterattack against Mouri-01 who had taken a seated firing pose.

Mouri-01 remained in that seated firing pose. She could not dodge like that and the table acted as cover, hiding Ootani from her.

What is she going to do? wondered Mitotsudaira.

But then she heard a quiet voice. It was Mouri-01's.

"Everyone, I leave this to you."

She called out to someone with an almost carefree tone.

Mouri-01 formed many thoughts in her artificial brain.

She did not know all of what Ootani Yoshitsugu could do. But there were two areas in which she was certain she had an advantage.

...My thought speed and memory capacity as a Belle de Marionnette!

She knew that Ootani Yoshitsugu was an ether lifeform and a data entity. From a theoretical standpoint, his thought speed would be equal to the greatest speed at which ether could be constructed: infinite speed. Automaton were the same in that regard, but since he was made purely from ether, he would have less thought speed resistance.

But he was a program and an individual. His thought logic was supplied entirely by the program constructing him. That meant he had to calculate everything himself and could not have someone else handle it.

Belle de Marionnettes were different. Their artificial brains were equipped with circuits for calculating several thoughts separately and they could use their shared memory to leave processing tasks with other *Belle de Marionnettes*.

He used serial processing that was like running quickly down a long road.

They used parallel processing that was slower but allowed them each to rush down a short road.

Looking at the time from the beginning to the end of the processing, he could never outdo them.

Then there was the issue of memory capacity.

The amount of data that could be used for remembering things was controlled by their memory devices and the size of those devices.

Ootani Yoshitsugu was humanoid, so his memory capacity could not leave *human-sized* territory.

Meanwhile, the *Belle de Marionnettes* had shared memory, so they could

stock up their decisions.

That meant they could use their high-speed thoughts to make many decisions and select the best one from their stock.

Mouri-01 had already informed her fellow *Belle de Marionnettes* of the current situation and been given a stock of many decisions.

They used simple words as a key, so she listened the others' suggestions: "Lady Mouri-01, you should jump over the table and make an aerial attack!"

"How about you and Lady Terumoto dodge and let the table sweep aside the other nations' leader!?"

"Staying there, clinging to the table, and sliding along with it would probably feel great!"

These were split-second decisions. Some gave consideration to actual tactics, while others were more absurd. But she would not know whether or not any one of these was truly useless until the situation played out.

So Mouri-01 stocked up all of those thoughts in her shared memory.

And she used her high-speed thoughts to judge the time limit.

...The table will reach the critical collision point in another 20 seconds within my accelerated thoughts.

She had to make a decision by then.

She used her high-speed thoughts to calmly view the moving scene before her eyes.

...Now, then.

I need to choose, she thought.

The decision that Mouri-01 made in her high-speed thoughts was one that allowed her to dodge and attack.

She would raise her hips but swing her body backwards.

...I will stand on the table...!

She would fall back because she had no reason to move beyond the approaching table.

If she could stand on the table and fall back along with it, the expensive furniture would act as a shield. It would be especially effective as a barricade against Ootani Yoshitsugu thanks to the barrier *signe cadres* piercing it.

This was not a problem.

In order to match her speed to the table's, she would need to adjust how quickly she raised her hips.

She would use the standing motion to leap backwards.

If she had been standing, she could not have immediately leaped backwards. She would have needed to lower her hips first.

But while sitting, she could use her knees and hips as springs to launch herself backwards.

She had not planned for this.

She had just so happened to remain seated while gathering everyone's opinions.

But, she thought. I did not panic and immediately reach the decision that I needed to stand up. Does that mean I am developing some combat instincts within me?

...This is interesting.

She had gone through training and fought in battles, but she had not expected for a machine like her to use her "instincts" against someone on the level of a Special Duty Officer. Henri was often thinking about humans, but what was wanted of *Belle de Marionnettes* may have been surprisingly similar.

"Now, then."

Mouri-01 ended her high-speed thoughts.

She moved. The command she had decided on was sent to her body.

She matched her speed to the table's.

"..."

And she kicked.

Just then, Mouri-01 saw light grow from the approaching table.

It was a blade.

Ootani Yoshitsugu's glowing sword stabbed through the table and raced toward her chest.

Ujinao sensed it all.

Ootani and Mouri-01's attack and defense intersected in an instant.

Ujinao understood what had happened.

It was a strange battle.

Their locations were impossible to predict based on their starting points and the result.

...Oh?

First, Ootani kicked the table forward and Mouri-01 attempted to fall back while standing on that piece of furniture. The table had been kicked with enough force for Ujinao to adjust the speed at which she fell back.

But a moment later, things shifted.

First, it was Ootani.

Ujinao's senses detected him shattering while still in his kicking pose.

This was not the result of cumulative damage from the barriers. She knew that thanks to the Asama Shrine Representative who had retreated to the side. The girl spoke up with a sharp voice: "The enemy's ether reading has not diminished!"

Ootani had not shattered.

What had shattered was his shell – his lingering traces.

The contents were elsewhere after taking a different form.

Where were they and what form had they taken?

...A sword!

Ujinao was familiar with swords, so she caught on quickly.

When Ootani had kicked the table, his hands had been empty.

Then where had his sword gone?

...The bottom of the table!?

The table was clearly thick since it had withstood Mouri-01's gunfire.

Ootani must have stabbed his blade of light into the underside.

That meant he had not kicked the table so it would hit them.

It was to transport his body after reshaping it into a sword.

Ujinao stroked the sword on her right hip as she fell back.

"That does sound like something a data entity would do..."

Ujinao now knew what the enemy was.

...The warrior part is not his true form!

Most likely, he was a program made of ether without a fixed form. He had only taken on the warrior form and equipment so he could move around more easily.

He could compress his data into whatever body part or piece of equipment he liked so it could be transported. So where was he now that he had abandoned his other parts?

...The bottom of the table!

Ootani would appear from the sword like water welling up from a spring. So what would he do next?

"Mouri-01!"

Before Ujinao could provide a warning, a glowing sword pierced the table and raced out.

It stabbed into Mouri-01's chest.

Mitotsudaira saw Mouri-01 receive the attack.

The automaton had just raised her hips to fall back.

The glowing blade stuck out from the right side of her back.

It was a direct hit.

The sword entered below her right breast and left through her back.

It accurately stabbed out below the shoulder blade, so that attack would have split the lung and sliced through the heart.

At this rate, the table would crash into her, but...

Asama: "Kyaaaaah! Zubyyyyaaaaah!!"

Novice: "No, Asama-kun! That was more of a 'stab!' or 'shnk...!' "

Four Eyes: "I see you're going with fairly normal onomatopoeia now."

Novice: "Well, when I wrote 'ndo zpubryazorizori——!', someone on an anonymous site said it was incomprehensible and took especial offense at the 'zorizori' part. And come to think of it, that was you, wasn't it!?"

Four Eyes: "That sounds like me, but I've posted things like that so often I don't remember that one."

Unturning: "You two sure are close."

Four Eyes: "...Are we?"

Novice: "Not again! Not again!! And there's kind of a battle going on!"

That is true.

But there was new movement beyond the sign frame Mitotsudaira had glanced at.

Mouri-01's right arm had been severed at the base.

Her summer uniform's sleeve was partially torn and her right arm flew through the air, but...

...Eh?

Mouri-01 was moving. And not because she was wobbling from the injury or

unsteady from the force of the attack.

"Too bad."

Mouri-01 got up. She matched her speed to that of the approaching table, placed the sole of her right foot on it, and stepped onto the diagonal surface.

She did not falter as she began surfing on the table and Mitotsudaira realized something.

...This is the same as Walsingham and Horizon...!

"She removed her right arm before the attack hit, didn't she!?"

That was exactly what had happened.

Mouri-01's right arm rotated itself through the air.

With the inner shoulder connector exposed, it sent itself out at a height of 3 meters.

This was gravitational control.

Her right arm aimed its pistol toward the blade sticking out of the table.

At the same time, she swung her left hand out.

The components of a second pistol spilled from the left side of her skirt.

The metal firearm was instantly assembled in her left hand and it aimed at the blade protruding from the table.

Ootani Yoshitsugu was a data entity, so the blade was a part of him and he would take damage if it was shot.

"You are mine!"

Gunfire rang out.

However, it came as a surprise to Mitotsudaira. First, it was only one shot. And second...

...That was fast!

The timing was wrong.

Mouri-01's right arm had fixed itself in midair and its pistol fired a beat too

soon.

And not at Ootani Yoshitsugu.

"Mouri-01!?"

Her own arm fired her own pistol at her own body.

Asama could not follow all the action.

She was a student and a shrine maiden. She did not understand the subtleties of close-quarters combat or the meanings of the various actions.

But there was one thing she understood better than Mitotsudaira or Ujinao.

She understood why Mouri-01's right arm had fired on her.

...I know what that is...

While falling back, she saw Mouri-01 knocked to the left.

Asama watched her long blonde hair fluttering through the air and her right arm fixed motionlessly in the air.

"That is a virus program!"

That was Ootani Yoshitsugu's true form.

"He is not a mere data entity! He is a virus that uses divine transmission pathways to mess with and hijack divine transmissions devices and program-controlled machines!"

Mouri-01's right arm had been hijacked by Ootani Yoshitsugu.

Someone made a decision as soon as they saw that.

It was Asama.

She quickly confirmed the Musashi's purification information.

"...Any reports or records of an intrusion!?"

External virus programs attacked the Musashi on a daily basis. Nations, corporations, and individuals would attack them in the hopes of gaining the

data within the Musashi.

To defend against those attacks, checkpoint gates were set up at various points around the divine network. On top of that, the divine transmission pathways were purified.

The daily tuning of the divine transmission and ether pathways did more than maintain the ship's infrastructure; it also eliminated any viruses that had made it through. The process was performed periodically, but Asama tried to do her own check whenever she had some spare time.

...In addition to viruses, it also prevents stagnation, mysterious phenomena, and divine transmission interference.

The Asama Shrine had been in charge of this for many years, so they could generally perform the tuning with a single command.

Everything impure or malicious was purified and most of it was returned to ether.

At the same time, people's personal divine transmission histories were checked for anything "extra" that had made it in from outside. For example, there was an idiot who kept hitting the "enter" button for a European uncensored religious art site which was clearly a scam, an idiot who viewed a porn game walkthrough site crawling with viruses, and an idiot who regularly browsed a porn site that stole your personal information. Of course, it was all the same idiot.

Recently, she had installed Hidden Nobility, stealth monitoring software used by shrine experts, on his sign frame and PC, but she was a little worried she was turning their national representative into a porn spy.

At any rate, she had confirmed that Musashi was safe. But had they only won because they could pour so much more power into their defenses? It was possible Ootani had appeared here because he could not touch the Musashi.

...But we should probably inspect all of the transport ships.

She immediately sent word to her father.

Asama's Dad: "Okay! I'll head to the port and check it out!"

How many do you think there are?

But the situation was still underway.

Mouri-01 had been sent flying and the table had accelerated toward them.

And up above, Mouri-01's pistol aimed their way.

"Watch out...!"

Asama activated a defense barrier and started to move forward.

With him and Horizon falling back, she thought it was her duty to move in front of them. However...

"Wait, Asama," he said. "You can't move out in front."

"You mustn't, Asama-sama!"

Two hands reached out from behind to stop her.

They were Horizon's.

And as she wrapped her arms around the shrine maiden, her hands grabbed ahold of her breasts from behind.

...Eh?

Asama did not often experience such a solid grope.

Ootani heard a scream.

It came from beyond the table he had pushed forward as a barricade and weapon.

He thought it had to be Mouri-01's, but...

"Kyaaaaah!?"

...Why is the Asama Shrine Representative screaming!?

Hashiba had informed him that infighting was extremely common for Musashi, but he had never expected it here.

He was glad he belonged to the peaceful Hashiba forces. He had heard Shibata's forces were also quite cannibalistic, but...

...Musashi is frightening indeed if their "survival of the fittest" attitude is stronger even than the Shibata forces!

Laughter echoed from the Musashi's deck.

It was Kimi. She was lying on her side atop her bench and she had one arm over her bare breasts and one holding her stomach.

"Heh heh heh. Now that's a nice and deep groping! Can anyone do that for me!? Oh, I'm sure you can, Mito's mom, so you don't need to try! C'mon, Adele! Or Suzu! Come here and start groping!"

"Eh? Eh?"

"Why me!? And things are looking dangerous up there!? What are we supposed to do!?"

"Good question."

"An excellent question."

"A good question."

"A very good question."

Kimi, the Reine des Garous, Narumi, and Gin all spoke at once.

Kimi looked to the Reine des Garous, who looked to Narumi, who looked to Gin, who...

"Master Muneshige."

"Judge. ...That ship is under Mouri's control, so we cannot jump onto it from outside. It would automatically take defensive actions against a foreign intruder. ...And Mouri probably wants to avoid owing us a favor when we have a battle tomorrow. So we can only entrust this with the people already there."

"A very good summary."

"A good summary."

"An excellent summary."

"Good summary."

After hearing their answer, Adele finally shouted up at the diplomatic ship.

"5th Special Duty Officer! Good luuuuuuck!!"

Ootani saw Mouri-01 fly out from behind the table and into the air on the right.

Her flight would be partially due to her kicking off of the table. With an automaton's thought speed, reducing the impact to minimize the damage would be a simple task.

But Mouri-01 held a gun in her left hand.

From his perspective, it was the outside arm. She would have difficulty turning around enough in midair to aim his way and, even if she did manage to shoot him, whether it was a devastating hit or not would be entirely up to luck.

So he decided now was the time to act.

He would kick the table again to slam it against the opponents who were falling back.

He aimed left, toward the Houjou and Mouri representatives.

He had to stop them with the table while he took care of his true target.

His true target was Musashi's Chancellor.

...He is Hashiba-sama and Mitsunari-kun's greatest foe!

He would be an enemy of Hashiba's forces at Sekigahara and the Osaka Campaign.

Slaying him here would be a valuable result.

"Mouri! Houjou! You are attempting to toy with the history recreation for your own futures! So I intend to exterminate that playful attitude at the root!"

With that, he pushed hard on the table.

While lifting his body forward, he struck the table with his shoulder and...

"Here I go!"

He kicked the bottom of the table.

In that instant...

...Huh!?

His control system for visual data saw something.

The Mito Lord was charging straight toward him.

It only took an instant.

Ootani thought the Mito Lord was going to jump over the table. Either that or use it as a stepping stone to circle behind him.

But he was wrong.

The Mito Lord matched his pace from directly ahead and then raised her right knee.

And...

"Here...!!"

She hit the table with a crushing kick immediately after he kicked it.

And her kick sent it down toward him with enough force to break the two remaining legs.

As a result, the table lost all support.

"...!?"

And it rapidly snapped shut.

Ujinao sensed something unbelievable.

...Huh?

The table lost its legs and became no more than a board.

That was the Mito Lord's counterattack against Ootani's kick.

And she did more than just kick it back.

She dropped her heel down on it like an axe.

That blow struck the thick table and smashed the two legs supporting it. And as the sound of destruction filled the air...

"How about that!?"

There was nothing more than the tabletop below the Mito Lord's foot.

Ootani was below there.

He had to have been crushed. The table had been instantly flattened to the ground, so there was no way he could have escaped.

But she soon had her answer.

There was light.

A crushed wind whipped up from the gap below the tabletop the Mito Lord stood on, but...

...That isn't it!

A humanoid figure grew from the center of the tabletop.

That warrior was Ootani Yoshitsugu.

As a data entity, he had deactivated the setting used to interact with the tabletop.

The table had not crushed him.

Ootani Yoshitsugu forcefully jumped up.

"Impressive...!"

With that, he swung his sword toward the Mito Lord.

The weapon grew as he swung it. It extended to several meters in order to slice horizontally through the Mito Lord's torso.

It hit.

And light shattered at the slash's destination.

The solid sound provided the answer.

Ootani's sword had shattered.

Ootani Yoshitsugu saw the shards of light scattering in the wind.

...It shattered!?

That was exactly what had happened.

The sharp point made from his own body had grown long enough to easily reach the enemy, but it had been broken.

Why? he wondered. *I did not have the blade judge a hit until it was right on the verge of hitting.*

"———"

To answer his question, he looked to the enemy.

His high-speed vision saw the Mito Lord standing in front of him.

He knew she had Loup-Garou blood. Reading the Chancellor's Officers Almanac was enough to find that information.

But even with Loup-Garou blood, she should not have been able to touch a data entity like him.

...Then how...!?

Just as he asked that...

"———"

He detected an attack from behind.

It was the wind.

Some of his body had been scattered as a side effect of passing through the table.

It was that scattered portion of his body that sensed it. Ether and writing escaped the wrapped paper that seemed to contain his body and the wind carried it toward something.

...Cross-shaped barrier lernen figurs!?

Mitotsudaira moved forward.

She did so because Ootani had quickly ducked down.

He stayed low like a bug as two lines of light raced above his head.

They were blades. Cross-shaped ones made of ether.

They were two of the cross-shaped barrier sign frames that had been stabbed through the table.

They were anti-ghost and humans could not touch them.

Yet they flew through the air to reach her hand.

...I have a way to hold the unholdable.

The trick was simple.

"Silver chains!"

The silver chains were a divine weapon. They were made from ether metal and they retained that power even after being formed into physical chains.

The two obelisks attached to her hip hard points had ejected a silver chain each.

But she wanted to avoid grabbing Ootani Yoshitsugu with the tight arms on the end because she did not know how much of an effect Ootani's virus would have.

So she grabbed the two barrier sign frames with the silver chains' tight arms.

When she had slammed the table down, the barrier sign frames had floated up from the table due to their minimum altitude setting. After they fell out, she grabbed two of them and launched them at Ootani.

He had dodged the slashes she made at his back using the silver chains, but based on his timing...

...He's reliant on sight!?

Was there a reason why a data entity would insist on using a human form?

Asama would probably tell her if she asked, but the explanation would probably be quite lengthy.

For now...

"I can finally take you on!!"

Mitotsudaira pulled back the silver chains and sent the twin swords toward Ootani.

Chapter 23: Entangled Ones in the Open Heights

第二十三章

『露天高所の交錯者達』



思いがけないことは
思いがけないタイミングだからこそ
配点（食卓）

The unexpected

Occurs at unexpected times

Point Allocation (Table)

Ootani engaged in a sword fight.

He formed a data blade in each hand. The enemy's weapons were anti-ghost, but he had to strike down the enemy regardless. Thus, he adjusted his output to maintain a high anti-physical object setting.

...I cannot keep this up for long.

Strings of text danced along the ether paper wrapped around his body and it scattered into the air around him.

That glowing detritus surrounded him and was swept away by the wind as he struck at his opponent with dual solid noises.

The Mito Lord's sword technique was rough.

But not from a lack of skill.

She was not contained by any standard form and she used speed and strength to forcibly create the best possible actions for herself.

Thus, there was no "waiting" in her attacks.

At times, there was no pause for breath between attacks.

That left no apparent opening. If he was to match her movements and behavior to "strike at an opening", he would have to intervene in her speed and strength.

"You are like a beast...!"

Light scattered as the series of slashes constantly targeted his vital points.

Each individual attack was soft.

She was using the chains instead of her human joints. A wrist could only bend and turn so far, but these slashes were launched with whip-like speed and would even spin around. Also...

...The length of the chain adds to her reach...!

Those factors, combined with the Mito Lord's bursts of speed, led to a series of slashes.

She was a lone wolf, but she might as well have been a full unit of troops.

Her swords flew in gently but heavily.

She was using even more strength than necessary to defeat him.

Her sword technique had undoubtedly been developed through battle with an enemy more powerful than him. She mixed speed with brute force and included no attempt at trickery.

He dealt with all that while moving to get his blade through.

If the only opening was found by intervening in her speed and strength, then that was what he had to do.

Most of his power was being used for evasion and blocking the enemy's swords. His thought speed was causing him to heat up, so he had very little power left to spare. Thought was only useful after he had gotten his body to move appropriately.

Also...

"Mouri...!"

Mouri-01 was aiming a pistol his way from the edge of the deck. She would occasionally fire at him while one-armed and kneeling.

She only fired one shot at a time to ensure she did not hit the Mito Lord, so she predicted when he would attack and sent an accurate shot then.

She too would be using high-speed thoughts to take aim. Her firing pose was fixed in place because she could not divert any thoughts to moving her body.

But Ootani did have a method available to him.

He had hijacked her right arm which was still in the air.

He would have preferred to target the Mito Lord with it, but...

"...!"

He returned fire on Mouri-01.

He did not need rapid-fire here. His goal was to make her move. While moving, she could not take such careful aim to fire on him.

Also, he could not reload the pistol held by the stolen right arm.

He had to preserve the ammunition and endure.

...Yes.

Ootani thought, *I am enduring this great pressure from the enemy.*

Mouri-01 heard a sound.

"Ko."

It sounded a lot like a hand drum, but it was not the tone of a musical instrument.

It was Ootani. He deflected the silver wolf's attacks with his two swords and occasionally stuck his blades in and materialized them. And while tearing at the wolf's clothing and skin, he produced a sound.

"Ko, ko ko ko...ko."

It was laughter. It sounded like confusion or like a mimicked laugh.

But it was neither confusion nor mimicry.

...*You have little experience.*

The only information they had on Ootani came from the Testament. He would have been tested within P.A. Oda, but this had to be his first actual battle.

As an automaton, Mouri-01 realized something from that situation.

New experiences were valuable things. So...

"Ko ko, ko, ko."

She heard that awkward laughter.

"Mito Lord!"

And she sensed danger.

The vision of her high-speed thoughts saw the glow of Ootani's body intensify. His ether was heating up. It was only a slight increase in light, but...

...He is rejoicing...!

He felt joy in this situation.

Ootani laughed.

He had originally intended to criticize Houjou, Mouri, and Musashi and to attack the Musashi Chancellor if necessary. That was going too far for someone who would be lost at Sekigahara, but he thought that was best for now.

And if it was the best course of action, then it was justice. However...

...This great pressure is wonderful...!

He would meet his end when an ally betrayed him at Sekigahara and destroyed him. He would lose his forces and commit suicide rather than let the enemy lay a hand on him.

He must eventually be hopelessly surrounded like that.

Compared to *that*...no, when thinking about *that*, *this situation* was worth heating up over.

He was facing several enemies in enemy territory.

...Hm.

Someday, eventually, one day, and in the near future, he would fulfill his duty at the center of an even more intense scene.

He was no more than an artificial being.

Hashiba and the others who had created him likely had a number of thoughts on the matter, but a program had one primary purpose: to execute the code given to them.

The absolute code carved into his body was a single name: Ootani Yoshitsugu.

That was a wise and brave commander praised by Hashiba and a good friend of Ishida Mitsunari.

But he had later been inflicted by a serious illness and used his actions to call out to Mitsunari. He had temporarily sided with Matsudaira, but ultimately fought for the Western Army at Sekigahara.

The rest he had reviewed countless times.

His code would be completed at Sekigahara.

But he could only speculate about what had yet to occur.

Even after being assembled and rolled out by Hashiba, what knowledge he had of his eventual fate came from simulations carried out by his high-speed thoughts.

But this was different.

This was an enemy. The pressure of this enemy would eventually multiply to hundreds or even thousands of times this size and attack him.

"Ko, ko ko ko...ko ko."

He laughed from his throat. Yes, when encountering the unknown and learning of their possibilities, what they must accomplish, and what form would satisfy them, humans would laugh.

Ootani laughed and he was thankful. He was thankful for this battle in which the enemy immediately struck back when he interrupted their meeting to criticize them.

He was thankful for this opponent that made his future feel real to him for the very first time.

"Thank you very much."

With those words, he drew a sword.

This was not one of the blades he had held in either hand. It came from the center of his chest. He split his armor body open like it was a book.

"Come forth."

There was light and it was not shaped like a standard Far Eastern or Western sword.

It was the foundation of his power as a data entity. The sword-length object

rose up from his own body.

"Tsuruga Masamune."

It was a *daito*.

As soon as he wielded it, the sky glowed. Something arrived from overhead.

"Oh? Trying to make it a sure thing, are you?"

A great number of crosses dropped like a waterfall.

Mitotsudaira fell back.

The dense pack of barrier *signe cadres* were more like a solid mass than a wall.

This attack was meant to crush Ootani rather than restrict his movement.

They were Catholic and Mitotsudaira knew who had ordered for them.

"Looks like we can't go easy on you!!"

It was Terumoto.

Her group had already fallen back to the rear of the deck where Mouri-03 and the other automatons protected them. After Mitotsudaira saw her king and the others there too, she focused on the objects falling from the sky.

"———!"

She had the silver chains throw the two swords toward Ootani.

But she did more than throw them.

She sent them to either side of him to restrict any evasive actions now that he had drawn a sword from his chest.

But Mitotsudaira saw something in the instant the crosses completed their fall.

Ootani raised the sword he had just drawn.

Light exploded on the Mouri diplomatic ship's deck.

The cascade of barrier *signe cadres* was entirely deflected and scattered at once.

But that was not the intended result.

"They were broken...!?"

That was exactly what had happened.

Everyone there saw extraordinarily large destruction.

The only sounds were the roaring of air and the shattering of light.

As the glowing detritus and shards scattered, they built up for an instant and then exploded all the more powerfully.

All that remained were the many shards and glowing dust of the *signe cadres* and...

"Is that...?"

From close range, Mitostudaira saw something in the light.

A warrior stood at the center of the destroyed crosses.

Ootani Yoshitsugu was unharmed.

Mitotsudaira saw that Ootani Yoshitsugu had taken no damage.

The crushing attack from the sky had caused him no injury or hindrance.

...How did that happen?

Ootani was created from light shaped like wrapped paper and from scattering writing. He appeared to be standing there, unchanged from before. The only changes were the absence of the sword in front of his chest and...

"...?"

There was something within the scattering and falling light.

No, the objects in the light were not yet fully formed.

Something was slowly taking form in the air behind him.

They were arms.

Long, slender arms made of bluish-white light stuck out of the empty air behind him. There were three of them and the length to the first joint was at least 3 meters.

They were all identical in shape.

They had machine like joint structures, they looked like they would creak when they moved, and the end was combined with a blade. The overall shape reminded Mitotsudaira of something.

...A god of war!?

During the recent commotion at the Date clan, Masamune's god of war, the Seiryu, had supposedly had just its arm appear out of empty air.

Could Ootani actively eject just a portion of a god of war like that? But Mitotsudaira had to wonder what was at the other end of those arms. Also...

...How would a data entity pilot a god of war?

The god of war would be made from a program as well.

So how would Ootani use it?

Just as she wondered that, Ootani made his move. He raised his right hand and swung the wrist downwards.

"...Now, then."

She heard his voice.

She responded by moving forward.

She had no idea what she could accomplish here, but she could at least contact him using the silver chains. So...

...I will stop him!

But Ootani gave his god of war an unexpected movement.

"Assault them, Tsuruga Masamune."

One of the three arms slammed its giant blade straight down.

It pierced the deck like a stake.

A moment later, Mitotsudaira lost something: her footing.

The deck below her racing feet suddenly...

...Disappeared!?

Mitotsudaira's feet started to flail through the air, so she forced them forward instead.

The movement produced a solid sound from her heels and it brought her to a stop. That meant the deck existed below her feet.

Her footing had not disappeared.

But the long platform in the sky had definitely shaken. As if it had been hit by an impact, it lost power and fell lengthwise a bit.

And that was continuing. The diplomatic ship intermittently spat out writhing motions and shook violently.

The shaking was accompanied by the groaning of metal.

...What is this!?

Something was happening to the ship.

No. She could guess what was happening here. She was just unsure if she should trust her intuition since she had never seen or heard of something like this happening before.

How could she explain this situation?

"Lady Terumoto!" A *belle de marionnette* spoke over the ship's speakers. "Someone has locked down the ship's control system! We cannot control the ship! Currently..."

A shock ran through the ship's port side, which bordered the Musashi.

The vibration was powerful enough for the deck to creak and continuous metallic sounds reached them from the left.

...Is this...!?

"The port ether cannons are preparing to fire. The ether fuel restriction has been released! ...They are capable of firing!"

"Oh, dear. Now this is a problem. Could I ask something of you?"

Gin heard the Reine des Garous's voice.

A battle was underway on the Mouri diplomatic ship overhead.

...It sounded like quite an exciting battle. But now...

Sixteen hatches opened along the side of the diplomatic ship and short-barreled ether cannons stuck out.

Gin had already pulled out Cuatro Cruz due to the emergency situation, but she asked two questions just to be sure.

"Master Muneshige, is there no way for us to board the ship as belated reinforcements or to take the easy route and just sink the ship?"

And...

"Is it possible for the diplomatic ship to fire on us?"

"Well, Gin. ...For your first question, while they have announced they cannot control the ship, Lady Mouri Terumoto has not given us permission to board. So if we act, it could still lead to diplomatic issues."

"I see," said Gin as Muneshige continued.

He looked up into the sky where a row of sixteen cannons was visible on the diplomatic ship's port side.

"Generally, a diplomatic ship's weapons are locked down and unusable when it arrives. For an ether cannon, the fuel supply is cut off, the core shell creation mechanism is locked, and the other nation confirms this. However..."

"Those locks are meaningless now that the ship has been hijacked by a virus like Ootani Yoshitsugu."

"Judge. To respond to the unexpected, even a diplomatic ship cannot be left entirely defenseless and unarmed. While engaged in diplomatic relations, it will carry enough weaponry to escape from an enemy nation. But at this close range..."

Adele gave a shout while looking at the Reine des Garous who opened a sign

frame to arrange for something.

"Everyone, take defensive action!!!!"

The ether cannons erupted.

Asama saw light launched toward the Musashi from the port side of the shaking diplomatic ship.

It was the light of ether cannons.

These were light cannons that used an ether core shell. They could make an attack with just the firing mechanism and ether fuel, so they could be made quite small and could be installed without using up much ship space.

That was why small ether cannons were used in diplomatic ships and in the cannon batteries of large, fuel-rich ships. However...

...Isn't a simultaneous attack pretty dangerous!?

At such close range, the Musashi would have a hard time reacting. Asama began calculating out how many defense barriers would be put up in time.

"Oh?"

But Horizon spoke from behind her.

"Those are not going to hit."

"...Eh?"

Confused, Asama watched the light streaking through the sky.

The sixteen lines of light were high power and flew in straight lines.

...And they're headed toward...

They were fired forward from the diplomatic ship's port side, which took them toward Musashino's bridge-shaped ship's bridge about 800 meters away.

Given the shell speed, they would arrive in just over two seconds.

But something was apparent even to Asama.

Musashino was not responding at all.

She produced a sound in her mind due to that utter lack of reaction or even acknowledgment.

...Ah.

She was certain they would not hit. If the Musashi was not reacting, then the attacks were not on a collision course.

At the same time, the light raced through the sky.

The 16 beams shot past Musashino's bridge at about 30 meters directly above it.

"Musashi" viewed the Mouri diplomatic ship from atop Musashino's bridge.

She did not question the ether cannon blasts that had passed by overhead.

"If they do not hit, then they are not a problem. ...Of course, they were still dangerous as transport ships use that altitude."

She opened a sign frame.

It displayed the port side of the Mouri diplomatic ship.

There were sixteen cannons at the top of the white ship's hull. Their hatches were currently open.

Zooming in revealed ether cannons within.

"Normally, firing horizontally would have hit Musashino's bridge. The ship is under the enemy's control, so another method would be necessary to avoid a hit. Over."

"Musashi" saw Mouri's decision on the sign frame.

They had lost control of those ether cannons when Ootani Yoshitsugu hijacked them. So what had altered their firing trajectory?

"It would seem our help is truly indispensable. Over."

Beyond the opened hatches, people stood beside the cannons.

They were automatons.

Mouri's maid automatons were clinging to the cannons, two per cannons.

They had used their gravitational control and physical strength to forcibly alter the cannons' aim.

When she saw that, "Musashi" lightly lowered her head toward those fellow automatons in the distance.

"Judge. We should do that as well. Over."

"Great decision, Mouri-01!"

Voices intersected from the rear and center of the deck.

One came from Mouri Terumoto who stood with her arms crossed in front of the *belle de marionnettes* who were guarding their guests.

"It is an honor for you to say so...!"

The other came from Mouri-01 who smiled near the center of the deck with a pistol in her left hand and her right arm still missing.

Terumoto then opened her mouth wide to speak.

"That was a gun salute to celebrate the conclusion of our meeting! Rejoice that Musashi's negotiations with Mouri went well!"

Mal-Ga: "How are we supposed to rejoice?"

Gold Mar: "Yay... It didn't hit us... Yay... Like that?"

83: "What an unpleasant way of putting it."

Asama saw Masazumi hang her head and raise her opened hands to shoulder height a few times.

...Oh, she's raising her hands in celebration.

Asama: "Being a politician must be tough."

Vice President: "This is not a politician's job!"

But someone else took a step forward.

It was Toori and he was doing a wiggling dance of celebration.

"Hey, Teruko!"

"My name isn't Teruko, you moron!"

Both of them seemed kind of awful in that exchange. Regardless, he continued speaking while grinding his hips side to side.

"Does that gun salute mean our diplomacy went well!?"

"Huh?" Terumoto frowned but then spread her mouth horizontally. "Course it does!! Why else would we fire a gun salute!?"

Masazumi was still hanging her head, but she clenched her fists. Receiving that statement seemed to have helped her motivation recover.

But someone raised their voice in protest.

"Lies!"

It was Ootani Yoshitsugu who still had a long god of war arm and blade stabbing into the deck.

He swung his left arm down.

"I will fire the port-side cannons once more."

Terumoto immediately responded to that.

"Prepare for a second gun salute!"

"It is no use." Ootani knew what she intended to do. "I will add a trajectory setting next time. ...They will each curve downwards at a different angle to ensure they hit the Musashi."

Masazumi sensed danger.

...A trajectory setting?

He would set up the ether cannons, so their beams would curve downwards after being fired.

If he did that, changing the angle of the cannon would accomplish nothing. The ether cannon beams would hit the Musashi.

And that would prove that Terumoto was lying.

A hit would be very bad. These were sixteen ether cannons at close range.

Vice President: "I guess this is goodbye, everyone..."

Smoking Girl: "Hey, don't just assume this is going to end like that."

Musashi: "In an emergency, we will respond as best as possible even with a close-range attack. However, I must ask you all to defend yourselves as best you can. Over."

Flat Vassal: "...Why is everyone looking at me!?"

Wise Sister: "Heh heh. But even if we defend against this, it will prove that Mouri was just saying that and their statements will be nullified. I wonder what Mouri's boss thinks about that."

That's true, thought Masazumi.

They were here to negotiate, so she had to deal with Ootani using her words.

"Mouri Terumoto!"

Masazumi called out to Terumoto who stood in front of her with automaton guards.

"Listen! Mouri Terumoto, calm down and deal with this! Got that!?"

"Testament, I know, I know. Just leave it to me!"

That was reassuring. You could really tell she supported a major nation.

...Will this work?

Just as Masazumi wondered that, Terumoto pointed and yelled at Ootani.

"If you think you can do that, then prove it!!"

"Waiiiit!!"

Masazumi immediately took issue with that.

"Don't you know what will happen if that hits the Musashi!?"

"Ahh!?" Terumoto turned toward her with a frown. "Can *you* say what will happen!?"

Come to think of it, not very well.

After a moment, a divine mail arrived. It was from Neshinbara and the subject was "I wrote up what would happen!", so she held the sign frame up in both hands.

"Zgodragyagwaaaaahhhn. With a deafening explosion, dark and black smoke rises from the Musashi's deck but is soon swept away by a swift wind. Behold: The cannon-fire light is an angelic stairway from the sky. It carries the force of sixteen lightning strikes and is equivalent to having the sky crashing down upon us."

"You're completely monotone."

Masazumi smashed the sign frame against the floor.

Behind her, Horizon placed a hand on her shoulder, but she brushed it off.

"It would be very, very bad!"

"I see." Terumoto pointed at Ootani. "You're a very, very bad person! And the Musashi Vice President agrees!"

"Th-there is no need to be mean. And are you still going on with that nonsense!?" Ootani pointed at Terumoto. "You are showing no concern for the innocent people the ship's guns are aimed at! I can only call that evil!"

"Says the one aiming the guns at them!!"

Masazumi and all the other non-Mouri people made that retort.

But Terumoto was not listening. She puffed her chest out proudly.

"Then what are you going to do about it!? Well!? Tell me, you iidiot!"

"Mouri Terumoto! Don't provoke him! ...Hey! Houjou!"

Masazumi turned around and found Ujinao looking at a sign frame map of the Suwa region. She had a hand on her cheek and would occasionally sigh as she did her best to ignore the reality around her.

Ujinao was useless. And the idiot behind her...

"Hey! Seijun! Is it all gonna fall apart!? It is, isn't it!?"

"Toori-kun, stop trying to make things more exciting and try to calm down! Masazumi is about to persuade Terumoto-san!"

Vice President: "Don't ask the impossible!!"

Silver Wolf: "Oh? Th-that's not where this was headed?"

Me: "Hm... So some things are impossible even for Seijun..."

Tonbokiri: "Masazumi, if it comes to it, I can board the ship and resolve this, so do not worry!"

Now I'm worried, thought Masazumi. So...

"Mouri Terumoto! If you fire on the Musashi...I would find it truly regrettable!!"

Almost Everyone: "That's meaningless!!"

Vice President: "Shut up! 'Truly regrettable' is a level higher than 'very regrettable'!"

But while they argued, Terumoto responded.

"Fine, then. I guess we can't get Musashi caught in the middle of this. You're a foreign nation after all."

She maintained a serious expression and sighed once before turning toward Ootani.

"Hey, you listening, Ootani Yoshitsugu? Let's make a deal," said Terumoto. "I'm demanding it, so stop this nonsense, bow down, and apologize, you idiot."

"Don't provoke hiiiiim!!!"

"That's right! Everything you say seems meant to provoke me into a fight!" Ootani raised his right hand and tightly held the blade there. "Why are you so intent on fighting!?"

"Says the one who picked a fight with us!"

But saying that was not going to stop those two belligerent people.

Ootani swung his raised right hand to port, as if to deter any movement from Mitotsudaira.

"I will shoot!"

"Then do it, you moron!!"

"Testament!"

Ootani lowered his right hand.

Two of the three sword arms behind him stabbed into the deck.

"Fire...!"

The diplomatic ship shook from the port side.

Asama opened a defense barrier against the blast from port.

...Wow...!

The wind was more powerful than she had expected. A few automatons turned around and bowed toward her for erecting the barrier. The gust that swept across the ship from port was just that strong.

There was also light as ether light sprayed into the port-side sky.

The ether cannons had been fired. But...

"...Eh?"

Asama realized something while protected by the defense barrier.

The others there with her also noticed it.

To her right, Toori tilted his head.

"...Nothing happened to the Musashi."

That was right.

Beyond the blast and light, the Musashi had not erected a single defense barrier.

And it was unharmed.

How did that happen? wondered Asama.

The ether cannons had definitely been fired. The wind and light had definitely been there.

...And the sound...

...was there too.

The din of destruction rang out from the port side.

She heard breaking metal, bursting flames, and frames snapping in a chain reaction.

But as she listened to that noise, a question occurred to Asama.

...If the Musashi is fine, why am I hearing destruction?

She would come up with the answer soon enough. But before she could draw in that answer and convert it into words, Terumoto spoke. She scratched her head and sighed as she did so.

"Oh, whoops. I got ahead of myself and screwed up."

Meaning...

"I was so eager to fire a second gun salute that I did it with the hatches closed. ...They detonated inside the hatches, so those cannons aren't gonna work anymore."

...That's crazy!

Adele gasped as she watched from below.

After the first attack, the Mouri diplomatic ship had begun work on the port side. The automatons had activated the emergency manual override for the hatches and shut them using gravitational control.

The hatches were made from armor panels, so even they had difficulty closing them. They applied the gravitational control from the inside and outside to fully close the metal doors.

"It is fortunate we were able to borrow a transport ship. We managed to

collect all of the girls working on the outside."

The Reine des Garous was pulling in a mooring line that extended up from the deck.

The other end was connected to a transport ship bearing the crest of Musashi Ariadust Academy. As she gently pulled that toward them, the automatons on its deck were all looking to the sky.

They were looking at Mouri-01 who stood on the port side of the diplomatic ship. However...

"Excellent job, everyone."

"Testament!"

They bowed toward the divine transmission and a few of them took each other's hands to confirm each other's memories.

While Adele viewed that, the Satomi Student Council President sighed and spoke next to her. She did not even try to hide the exasperation in her voice.

"They had the cannons misfire to destroy their port-side cannons. I have to admit that eliminates the threat to the Musashi, but it's still crazy. ...That had to have done considerable damage inside their ship."

"No, this is perfectly fine. Just look."

The Reine des Garous turned toward them with a smile.

And sure enough, when Adele looked back up toward the diplomatic ship...

"...Huh?"

A few sign frames had appeared around the ship.

And they said...

"Emergency...?"

Ootani realized what they were up to.

The misfire and self-destruction on the port side had done more than just eliminate the threat to the Musashi.

...It can't be...!

Just then, two of the arm swords behind him exploded.

The sudden occurrence was accompanied by dual sounds resembling splitting ice.

They self-destructed.

Those two arms had injected a virus in order to take control of the ship and perform the firing control.

If they had shattered and scattered as light...

"You took back control of the ship...!?"

"Not quite," replied Terumoto.

He turned around to find the Mouri leader with her arms crossed. She took a breath before continuing.

"There was internal damage to the ship's port side. It's only mid-level damage, but it will cause serious problems with the ship's flight. Thus, the ship's control OS entered emergency mode and cut off the autopilot. As a result..."

He knew what had happened.

"It shifted to manual control...!?"

But Terumoto had a similar answer here

"That's not quite it either."

Because...

"This ship was originally under my control. With that misfire, it merely became entirely manual. Meaning..."

Meaning...

"This ship has been mine all along."

That's crazy, thought Masazumi for the umpteenth time that day.

But Terumoto had accomplished what she set out to do.

...She forcibly created an emergency to remove control from Ootani.

Smoking Girl: "The emergency override is an automatic system that takes priority over any part of the control OS to ensure the safety of anyone onboard. ...Ootani may have hijacked the control system, but in an emergency, the override system takes precedence over the control system and the controls revert to manual. ...That uses a separate command hierarchy, so Ootani was unable to intervene."

"But," said Naomasa before saying the same thing Masazumi had thought.

Smoking Girl: "That was crazy."

Vice President: "I don't want to hear that from the engine division that intentionally let Isa's bombs detonate."

Smoking Girl: "That was within acceptable bounds. ...So it didn't count as an emergency."

Still sounds crazy to me.

...But it's true we've made progress.

"Hey! What are you gonna do now, Ootani Yoshitsugu!?"

Terumoto was free now. Ootani's virus could no longer overturn their persuasiveness. So...

"...You are too naive."

With those words from Ootani, Masazumi saw three different movements.

The first was Mitotsudaira who had sensed something and accelerated toward Ootani.

The second was the third sword arm behind Ootani piercing the air instead of the deck.

And the third...

"Princess!!"

Mouri-01 cried out as it happened.

There was light. The third *daito* floating behind Ootani exploded.

Mouri-01 reflexively entered self-lockdown mode.

The other *belle de marionnettes* also ceased exchanging data with the outside.

Ootani's ether was a virus. Any contact with it and they would be hijacked.

However...

...*Eh?*

Mouri-01 realized something. The firewall of her locked-down OS was not detecting any external access attempts. Which meant...

...*Oh, no!*

Ootani's *daito* had been a feint. There had been no program contained in it, so it was only a flash grenade meant to blind them.

And what would he target while they were kept from moving?

"Princess!!"

Mouri-01 shouted that title once more. Once her vision returned, she saw Ootani sprinting across the deck.

He was moving toward their Princess, the Musashi Vice President, and the others there and he was only 20 meters away.

Masazumi saw Ootani approaching.

He was racing toward them and had his hands at the ready.

"Prepare yourselves...!"

The blade of light formed in his hands quickly grew.

The line of light attempted to reach them and take off their heads.

"———!"

Just as she gasped, Masazumi sensed light from an unexpected location: behind her.

Ootani's blades were right in front of her, yet something appeared from behind her.

"A second blade of light...!?"

Light clashed with light, the one prepared for the clash was destructive, and the one caught off guard was destroyed.

Ootani's blade was sliced through by the intercepting light.

Someone had rushed past Terumoto and smashed his light with a short sword held in a reverse grip. It was...

"An automaton!?"

Ootani's doubt came from his trust in his own virus.

The feint using the bright flash had been a ruse taking advantage of how frightening that virus was.

But the person who charged in front of him now freely used both arms and viewed him through a pair of glasses.

"Testament. ...Due to my poor work, I am a 'shut in' who is not given the same jobs as the others."

But...

"The one area in which I am competent is combat. I, Seki Masasada, will protect this place."

And she was not the only one.

Another blade of light targeted Ootani's.

"Not so faaaaaast!"

There was a voice.

It was a male voice and it suddenly came from right next to Ootani.

Three meters away from him was an automaton.

But this one was different from the Hexagone Française maids on the deck.

"...A Houjou maid automaton?"

"Indeed. ...But more importantly, Ootaniiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!"

The automaton opened their mouth wide and stuck out their tongue.

"You are in the presence of Houjou Ujiteru, so how about showing your faaaaaaace!? ...Ootani Yoshitsugu!"

Masazumi saw it.

The automaton claiming to be Houjou Ujiteru used their light-emitting sword to slash at Ootani's face.

Light scattered and something became visible on Ootani's face. It was shaped like...

...*A mask?*

No.

It was made from light and, based on its thickness, it was clearly his actual face.

However, it had no eyes, nose, or mouth. The smooth egg-like shape had holes in it.

One where the right eye should be and one where the mouth should be.

Were those a sight device and a speaking device?

The sight one curved upward in a shallow arc, perhaps to gather images on the left and right. The speaking one instead curved downward in a shallow arc.

It looked like he was smiling.

But he covered his face with his right hand. Specifically, he covered the blank left side of his face.

"Now you've done it...!" He spoke calmly. "So I shall count you as an enemy!"

"Then this is goodbye!"

With that shout, someone arrived behind Ootani. It was...

...Mitotsudaira!

Mitotsudaira did not let this moment escape her.

...This enemy is dangerous!

He used brand-new and unknown technology on the battlefield. So what was the best way of opposing that threat?

"Removing him!"

She threw a weapon at him.

It was the table.

She used a silver chain to swing the giant board like a racket and slam it into Ootani.

Ootani saw the enemy's decision.

He had not set himself to interact with the approaching table, so it would not hit him.

Or it should not have.

It did.

...What!?

His entire body took damage, like he had crashed into a wall.

And as his data entity body distorted, he noticed the trick to this blow.

It was the chain.

Her chains could make ether attacks, so she had wrapped one around the table so it could hit him.

A chain on its own he could handle. Even if it hit him, a blow from the chain's tight arm could be negated by purging the point of impact. Even if it grabbed or wrapped around him, he only had to separate his body into multiple pieces.

However, he had not expected an attack like this.

By wrapping the chain around the table, the blow gained great weight and surface area.

...Oh, no...!

Before he could release his virus, his body was ripped from the floor. Nothing he tried to do made it in time. And...

"Kh...!"

In something like a baseball hit into the opposite field, he was launched into the sky.

Mitotsudaira watched the ball fly from her full swing.

There was no need to run after him. He had flown plenty.

"He's flown off the ship. ...That's a home run!"

The warrior scattered light as he flew and someone launched an additional attack toward him.

A duo was rapidly ascending from the Musashi in the sky behind them.

"Margot, Naruze! It's in your hands now!"

There was no response.

Only the boom of cannon fire and...

"Herrlich!!"

The Technohexen word of praise joined the projectile that collided with the airborne light.

In the final moment, Ootani understood the logic of what had happened.

From the Mito Lord's attack to the Technohexen cannon blast...

...I left the Mouri ship and entered Musashi airspace!

The light of cannon fire came from a roll of coins given anti-ghost properties by Technomagie. And the projectile flew as a single whole instead of separating.

They had chosen fire for the anti-ghost element.

It was going to hit.

Just before it did, Ootani saw something in the visual scan carried out by his high-speed thoughts. One of his enemies did something different from all the others.

It was Mouri-01.

The one-armed automaton had held a pistol in her left hand before.

But no longer.

She had a *signe cadre* open and she was using it to send instructions.

...*What is she doing?*

Had her high-speed thoughts noticed his own?

She looked up at him and changed her expression.

Her lips showed the first signs of a smile.

Once a moment had passed, the actual smile would appear, but for now, it was only the beginnings of movement in her cheeks and the corners of her mouth.

Nevertheless, Ootani understood. The words scrolling along her *signe cadre* and that expression told him everything.

"You are streaming this battle to Kantou, aren't you!?"

Mouri had fought this battle for a specific purpose.

...*To reveal their stance to the Kantou nations...!*

Mouri was not well known in Kantou. Since they were combined with Hexagone Française, they were seen as a major western nation, but not much else was known about them.

The Kantou nations would find it difficult to trust Mouri if they said they were liberating Kantou.

That was why.

Mouri Terumoto would choose inaction at Sekigahara and betray the Western

Army despite being its leader.

Ootani would sacrifice himself for the Western Army at Sekigahara.

From the moment he came here and opposed her, Terumoto had already been looking ahead to Sekigahara and planning to liberate Kantou beforehand.

As a result, she had cooperated with Houjou and Musashi while driving back Ootani, a representative of the Western Army at Sekigahara.

There was only one possible conclusion.

"...The absolute beginning of the Kantou Liberation...!"

Musashi, Mouri, and Houjou had shown the Kantou nations that there was no avoiding it now.

As for Ootani...

...I was careless!

He took a defensive stance.

He began summoning the god of war parts he could call out instantly.

But the Technohexen attack was accurate.

"———!"

He was hit in midair.

Chapter 24: Familiar Faces on the Sanctioning Deck

第二十四章

『決裁甲板の古顔達』



それは予告無く
それは価値あるもので
それは二度と無い
配点（邂逅）

It comes without warning

It has value

And it never comes again

Point Allocation (Chance Meeting)

What Masazumi saw was more like shattering light than an explosion.

The ether forming Ootani's body broke apart and scattered through the sky. This was actually the very first time a data entity had ever been destroyed, but from a noncombatant's perspective...

Vice President: "That was flashy."

Asama: "But we'll have to be fully transparent with all the information we collect here...!"

Marube-ya: "Eh!? What!? Why!? Couldn't you sell that for a lot of money!? C'mon, Asama-chi! Give us that data! We can sell it to line our pockets!"

Worshiper: "Do you have any intention of doing honest business?"

It's always money with them, thought Masazumi as she watched the ether light in the sky.

A few pieces were blown away and began to fall, but...

Mal-Ga: "He might have transferred himself into one of those. ...Well, he shouldn't be able to recover right away with that much damage."

Vice President: "So we managed to incapacitate him...is that it?"

Novice: "It would be a problem if Ootani Yoshitsugu retired before Sekigahara. If he didn't want to retire, then the Testament Union would probably get after us for it."

...Yes, that's a problem too.

Masazumi turned toward the sky to port.

Naito and Naruze were waving her way while using gravity to enter freefall.

I'm glad I noticed, she thought as she waved back.

She saw Horizon, Mitotsudaira, and Asama do the same. The idiot instead wiggled his hands side to side in a gesture that made use of his full body.

Mal-Ga: “It pisses me off that I get what that gesture means...”

Gold Mar: “Should we shoot him?”

Mal-Ga: “Hm... We’re too close for it to make good practice.”

Me: “Y-you think I’m a target or something, don’t you!?”

Hori-ko: “And I have determined it would be meaningless at the moment due to Asama-sama’s super defense barrier.”

Asama: “No, no. It’s not much.”

Wise Sister: “Heh heh heh. Hear that, Technohexen!? Tremble in fear of Asama’s Giant Breasts Defense that can deflect your attacks with a barrier that only qualifies as ‘not much’! Boiiiiing!!”

Asama: “Wh-why does this idiot always have to nitpick what I say...!?”

That was just how she was. But while everyone regained their normal atmosphere, Masazumi had some other things to focus on.

“Princess, I would like to have this diplomatic ship make a temporary landing at Musashi – Tama’s diplomatic port. Is that okay? *For the purposes of sightseeing, of course.*”

“Testament. And *while we’re at it*, see if they can make any repairs that might need doing. ...The maids can rest in Musashi’s diplomatic residence. Have them prepare for the quarantine.”

Then I will do the same, said Ujinao.

Her uncle, Ujiteru, looked to the sky and ground from the starboard edge.

“Musashi, hm? ...It might not be a bad idea to land there for the first time. In fact, I like the sound of that!”

...The Musashi must seem strange to foreigners.

Did I find it strange? wondered Masazumi because that seemed like so long ago now.

It was two years ago. At the time, she had been nervous before arriving, but once she was there, she found a city and a daily life to live. She had quickly been swallowed up by her busy schedule. But unlike her...

...It might be an interesting place for tourists.

A sign frame appeared while she thought about that.

10ZO: “Masazumi-dono, I have made a visual estimate of where Ootani Yoshitsugu landed down below. Shall we pursue him?”

Vice President: “No, the surface is Houjou’s jurisdiction. But send me the estimated location because they should want that.”

Anyway, thought Masazumi as she took a breath.

Vice President: “Having three nations work together is a lot of work. Would it be best to have them linked through Asama to protect Musashi’s data?”

Asama: “Yes. Tenzou-kun, tell me if there is anything you’re concerned about related to the quarantine process. Once that is done, I would like Mary to look over the ether side of things. We’re playing catchup here, so I want to get as much of this done as possible.”

Scarred: “Judge. ...You want us to help protect Musashi, don’t you? Master Tenzou, let’s do our very best.”

There’s so much more work to do now, thought Masazumi with a mental sigh.

Of course, it had been obvious this meeting would change some things, so she had already planned for an extra burden.

But on the other hand...

“Mouri and Houjou have shown off quite a fighting force.”

Houjou Ujiteru and Seki Masasada.

She was not very familiar with the latter, but they were clearly not people you wanted as an enemy.

Ujiteru gave a nasal laugh as if in response to her thoughts.

He had an automaton body, he had just the hilt of a sword at his hip, and it was connected to a scabbard-shaped fuel tank. He looked their way and

approached with a confident swagger.

“Time to liberate Kantoooooou!! Sounds great! Isn’t it great!? Helloooooooo! Houjou will be destroyed either way, but I’m delighted I can participate in such a major event! My blood is pumping at this opportunity to do something importaaaaaant!”

Masazumi saw Ujiteru take a few steps and stop in front of them.

He relaxed his stance and rested his center of gravity on his right leg.

He looked casual, but even an amateur like her could tell that stance allowed him to move at a moment’s notice.

On top of that, he spoke. But first he slapped his cheeks to remove the loose smile there.

“Kuhahhh! ...I’m just along for the ride, but I plan to enjoy this. My niece, Ujinao, is in command, but I can’t fight my own character. I’m in a brand new body, so I’ll be moving around all I waaaant!”

He raised his eyebrows in a smile on his maid automaton face.

That seemed strange, perhaps because automatons did not smile.

What a strange character, thought Masazumi as she asked a question.

“...Houjou Vice Chancellor. How long have you had that body?”

“Testament! Due to a reason I won’t get into here, I had already been automaton-izing my body. It feels fantastic! But this was the first time to completely remake my body. ...It’s pretty great. Everything feels so clear and comfortable! I can just tell I’m inside a machine and it’s the most wonderful feeeeeeeeeeeeling!”

“That isn’t what I meant,” cut in Masazumi. “Why a female automaton? ... Shouldn’t you have chosen one that looks more like you?”

“Don’t be silly! I was given the perfect chance to try out a new model, so why would I choose the same thing I had before!? Also. A female one is a lot more amusing than some middle-aged man! Don’t you get that!?”

Sorry, but no I don't.

The world was a large place. And this man was supposed to be a politician.

...I bet my dad would be furious if he saw this.

“Hey! Koni-tan! I just summarized my Masazumi’s negotiation with Houjou and Mouri!”

“Judge! There was some confusion in the middle there, but that was some incredible skill! While watching that footage, I went ahead and made Houjou Ujiteru and Seki Masasada action figurines for my brand’s golem line! I must have been inspired because it took me no time at all!”

“Ohh, you even shaped their hands for holding weapons! Middle-aged men are fine, but the female action figurines are where it’s at! Okay, Koni-tan, let’s have a battle between those ones you made and the aerial figurine warriors I brought with me! Pewwwwwwww. B-b-b-b-booom! There, yours were sent into retreat by my aerial bombing!”

“S-surprise attacks are cheating, Nobu-tan!!”

...My dad and the rest of the council aren’t at all interested in that kind of thing.

Did Ujiteru like to play with dolls and saw his own body as the greatest doll of all?

Vice President: “A cosplayer Vice Chancellor can’t be fun to deal with.”

Me: “Whaaaat!? Seijun, why are you giving me that look!? Do you want a costume too!? I can get Bell-san to make one for you!”

Silver Wolf: “My king, you get your costumes from Suzu?”

Bell: “Eh? Oh, yes. So does...Kimi-chan.”

Asama: “I guessed as much when I saw the stitching while doing laundry.”

Bell: “But his shrine maiden...one is...from you, right?”

Asama: “W-well, I, uh, ordered that so he could, um, work part-time at the shrine.”

Hori-ko: “Now, everyone, Asama-sama is having a difficult time explaining herself.”

As everyone began bickering some more, Masazumi nodded in her heart.

...Well, I suppose they do make automatons in Houjou.

She worked to keep a smile as she spoke to Ujinao.

“Is your Vice Chancellor working to improve Houjou’s image by demonstrating your automaton technology? I can see why Houjou is known for its business acumen.”

“Huhhhhhh!? What are you talking about!? This is purely a personal hobby, you foooooooooo!!”

Ujiteru pointed his thumb at his own chest and showed off his teeth.

“It’s Uji-terrific!”

Behind him, Ujinao swung a scabbard into the right side of his head.

Flat Vassal: “That was certainly something.”

Bell: “Eh? B-boke? ...Tsukkomi? Which was...it?”

Righteousness: “These are the people we were fighting all this time...?”

Unturning: “There are always so many wonderful memories of the past.”

Righteousness: “Let’s not lie to ourselves!”

Scarred: “Anyway, who are Master Houjou Ujiteru and Lady Seki Masasada?”

“That’s a good question.” Tenzou crossed his arms. “Houjou Ujiteru is – for better or for worse – said to be the strongest Houjou commander in this age. It was Ujinao-dono’s father, Houjou Ujimasa, who inherited the Houjou clan, but Ujimasa-dono was more the civil leader type. Ujiteru-dono, on the other hand, is the combat type. Ujiteru-dono has greater influence in the Warring States

period and he occasionally plots to take over Houjou.”

“That is how things tend to be done in this age.” Mary placed a hand on her cheek and smiled bitterly in her shirt and blue tights. “If I could fight, would I have been like that?”

“If you had that kind of power, I think you would have used it to assist Elizabeth-dono.”

Mary’s mouth fell open when he said that.

It was a look of surprise.

Specifically, it was the look of being caught off guard by something.

“Oh, um, I, uh, meant based on who you are now. The Testament descriptions are a different matter...”

“I’m glad that didn’t happen.” Mary smiled. “Because if I had helped my sister, it might have been even more difficult for you to steal me away. And if I, um, had the power to back it up, I probably would have tried negotiating with you to get you to stop. I would have said...”

Mary made a grand gesture and used a tone to match.

“Let us see just how long you can endure my oral technique!”

Gold Mar: “Oral technique...!?”

Mal-Ga: “Okay! Okay! Keep things the way they are! Just like that! I’ll be right there, so wait for me!”

10ZO: “Stay awayyy!!”

Tenzou made sure Mary had not noticed the exchange on their sign frames.

Then he looked around.

He saw everyone feigning ignorance while turning their ears toward him and Mary.

...They’re going to try something after the fact again, aren’t they?

But he had something to tell Mary.

“It is true stealing you away would have been difficult if you were helping Elizabeth-dono.”

Silver Wolf: “In that case, he would have had to fight the Fairy Queen immediately after Walter.”

Uqui: “Now that would have been an impossible challenge.”

Smoking Girl: “More importantly, she would have just cut him down during their date in London.”

We might as well end the conversation right there, Naomasa-dono.

However, these were two different things.

“But no matter the situation...”

Tenzou recalled what he had said during his confession.

...Back then, I said, um...

“Even if you refused and resisted, I would have stolen you away.”

Heidi gave a quiet whistle while calculating out her credit sales.

...I-I don't like the sound of that whistle!

But someone moved beyond her. Narumi faced Urquiaga.

“Should I have resisted more?”

“Ho ho? It is too late to claim you weren't really trying.”

“You don't seem to understand this was no more than the girl recognizing the boy's effort.”

I can never tell how serious they are with their threats.

Next to them, Muneshige smiled bitterly.

“There was nothing like that for us.”

“Judge. That's right, Master Muneshige. Because we had an official battle.”

The couple that readily accepts that is quite something too.

Meanwhile, Mary's cheeks flushed and she cleared her throat.

“We are getting off topic, Master Tenzou.”

“Oh, no, no. That was just to make sure you understood. ...Isn't that right, Neshinbara-dono?”

“...Oh, are you done?”

“N-not the reaction I wanted!!”

“Calm down,” said Neshinbara. “Crossunite-kun more or less summed up Houjou Ujiteru. But to add a bit, you remember Mayoress Marfa who was in charge of Sviet Rus's Novgorod, right?”

“I do, but what about her?”

“Do you remember that she inherited the name of Uesugi Kagetora before inheriting a Shibata name? Kagetora was a heroic figure who was expected to inherit the Uesugi clan after Uesugi Kenshin passed away. But Kagetsuna got the better of him in the fight over succession, so he fled Houjou, was cornered, and committed suicide.”

Four Eyes: “That suicide happened on the way to ask for assistance from his homeland of Houjou. In other words, Uesugi Kagetora was originally from Houjou and was later adopted into the Uesugi clan. And he was Houjou Ujiteru's younger brother.”

Novice: “Wh-why would you just come out and say it! I still had a long way to go before getting there!”

Silver Wolf: “Didn't she do that *because* it was taking so long?”

Hori-ko: “Really, Mitotsudaira-sama? When fighting your morning battle, don't you want to give a thumb's up and say ‘I did it...!’ when you finish an unexpectedly long one?”

Flat Vassal: “That's tru-...why is everyone looking away!?”

Smoking Girl: “Adele, you sometimes shout ‘yes!’ and ‘all right!’ in the stall. You probably don't realize you're doing it, but you really need to be more careful.”

Mal-Ga: “Now I need to redo my storyboard... Well, I wasn't too satisfied with how I'd drawn the dog, so that's perfect.”

Flat Vassal: “What are you drawing!? Stop making things up and only draw what’s true!”

Isn’t that why she’s redoing it?

But Mary was tilting her head.

“Is there a direct connection between Novgorod’s Mayoress Marfa and Master Ujiteru?”

“Since they are inherited names, there doesn’t have to be.”

“Judge,” said Mary, but Tenzou had a question.

“Does something bother you about that?”

“Judge. If they had a direct connection, it would mean Master Ujiteru is also a demon on Lady Marfa’s level.”

“Yes, that part is true, I think.”

Someone answered her.

It was Narumi and she looked up at the diplomatic ship.

“There is no direct connection, but since one of them was a demon, I believe there was a general idea that it would work out as long as the other one was too. ...Houjou Ujinao is from a demonic long-lived family and Ujiteru is from an Indian demon family.”

Specifically...

“The Asura fighter god type. I believe another one was their Vice President. Or am I misremembering?”

I see, thought Masazumi as she watched the automaton crouch down and hold his right cheek.

Behind her, Ujinao sighed.

“Do not worry, uncle. ...I used the back of my blade.”

“D-don’t get so cocky just because you’re my niece.”

“So you want me to chop off your head again.”

That was not a question.

Ujiteru silently stood up, removed his own head, and lifted it up.

After a few seconds, he returned it to his neck.

“Heh hehhhh! Chopping off my head is useless! You iiiiiiiiiidiot!”

“Then I will slice it in two.”

“Waaaaait! Do that and I’ll die! You’d think you have devil horns saying things like that! Oh, wait! You do! Never mind then! I’m going to live my life the way I want! Hey, don’t chase meeee!”

Masazumi saw a blade grow out of Ujiteru’s back.

And Ujinao nodded once.

“Please be quiet.”

“W-wait, that was my sp-sp-sp-spinal c-c-c-cor-arrrrgh!? Watch it!”

...I’m not sure which one is more impressive.

Meanwhile, a glasses maid walked by.

“Princess!”

It was Seki Masasada. She ran over toward Terumoto.

She was in such a rush that she entirely ignored her surroundings. That told Masazumi something: *...Oh, she’s worried about her master.*

Some might see it as the beautiful love between a master and a servant. *There’s a similarity to Mitotsudaira there*, thought Masazumi. And then...

“Princess! I can’t! I-I just can’t do it!!”

“No, you were really cool. Just keep it up like that.”

“I-I caaaaan’t!”

Huh? thought Masazumi as she saw Seki quickly hide behind Terumoto.

She must have used some kind of special technique because the large maid uniform was entirely hidden behind Terumoto’s slender form.

Silver Wolf: “That’s impressive. I can’t see her at all. I suppose I should expect

that from the head of the Seki clan.”

Mitotsudaira commented on the situation while removing her silver chain from the table.

And...

Wise Sister: “You know who she is, Mitotsudaira!?”

Silver Wolf: “...I’m not sure why you’re so excited, but she’s fairly well known in Mouri. According to the Testament, Seki Masasada is the representative of the Seki clan, a ninja group that serves Mouri. The Seki clan began doing spy work during Motonari’s era and guided a number of operations to success.”

Novice: “It was the Seki clan that supported the destruction of the Amako clan and the Battle of Itsukushima from behind the scenes. They also assisted the fierce Mouri commander Sugihara Morishige when he hunted down Yamanaka Yukimori who we know better as England’s Walter Raleigh. Masasada is the Seki Representative who served during Terumoto’s era.”

I see, thought Masazumi.

She made occasional checks of the Chancellor’s Officers Almanac, but...

Vice President: “I need to go back over the people who only recently inherited names and made their debut. I need to keep up on that boring sort of work too.”

Sticky King: “Wouldn’t there have been a notice on the Testament Union’s divine transmission site?”

Vice President: “It leaves a record when you browse it, so I can’t do so carelessly. This was a lot easier before K.P.A. Italia fell to Hashiba.”

In central Musashino, largescale repair work was underway from the surface to the underground.

Two people sat below the eaves of a small rest area on the stern end of the ship.

It was short-sleeved Ookubo and Kanou.

The banging of construction hammers rang through the air as Kanou viewed a sign frame and looked below the shadows. She tilted her head toward Ookubo whose face was covered in the shadow of the eaves.

“Milady, if the Vice President needs that done, I could check on it or monitor the divine transmissions for that sort of information. I should be able to put together a report for her.”

“No. We don’t need to do anything until she asks.”

Ookubo glared into the distance while bringing something to her mouth.

It was shaved ice. The rest area behind them doubled as a snack bar and people were at work inside. They were all in high spirits and wearing the uniform that had been chosen by survey.

They wore automaton maid uniforms.

“Yes, but they forgot to mention on the survey that all of them are men.”

“Why did everyone just assume that snack bar workers would be women?”

Stubbly and muscular maids served shaved ice or yakisoba to the customers. They all spoke far too rapidly and loudly while rolling their r’s.

“Wellllllc’mee! Strawb’rrrrry flav’r!? Comin’ rrrright up! ...Master.”

“Okayyyy, got it! Thrrrrree ik’yaki! ...Master.”

“Heyyyy, mist’rrrr! Sorrrry ‘bout the wait! That’ll be 100 yen! Come agaaaaain! ...Master.”

Kanou faced forward and looked up at the diplomatic ship with smoke and ether light mist rising from its port side.

“Milady, isn’t the ‘master’ part entirely unnecessary?”

“If they stopped that, the costumes would be too confusing.”

“Anyway.” Kanou took a bite of shaved ice dyed red by strawberry syrup. “I should find a way to check the Testament Union site without leaving a trace.”

Just then, some text appeared on her sign frame.

Asama: “What should we do, Tenzou-kun? IZUMO will be monitoring the

Testament Union site in order to gather information, so should we have them send that our way?”

10ZO: “No, gathering intelligence is my job. I’ll ask a member of my Special Duty Unit who is familiar with that sort of thing. They should be able to check what the site says in a day or two.”

Ookubo and Kanou watched that arrangement in silence for a few seconds.

Finally, Kanou turned around with eyebrows raised.

“Milady! Now! Now is the time! Say we will do it! Otherwise, they will get there ahead of us!”

“Why would we accept defeat instead of waiting for the request to come in, Kanou-kun!?”

“You need to think of defeat as a form of victory! You do them a favor so they are indebted to you!” Kanou placed a hand on Ookubo’s shoulder. “Milady, I will bring a second and third bowl, so you take it easy and work out a method on your own!”

Asama saw Masazumi raise her eyebrows after checking her sign frame.

“Ah. ...Hey, Crossunite, Asama? It looks like you don’t need to bother. Kanou sent me a divine mail saying Ookubo will handle it.”

“Committee Head Kanou? ...Ookubo-san must be so busy.”

“Yes, she was more or less in charge of Musashi during our study camp... Anyway, it does help if I don’t need to use any of my people for this,” said Tenzou on the sign frame. “Now, if you all have managed to catch your breath, can I ask Asama-dono to perform the purification? I am going to work with the port to set up an emergency quarantine on Tama.”

“Understood. If this ship is landing on the Musashi, we will be given a lot of authority over it. Their diplomatic privileges will prevent us from doing much inside the ship though, so what should we do about that?”

“After what happened with Ootani, I imagine Mouri will want the ship purified. ...Hey, Mouri Terumoto.”

Terumoto turned around when Masazumi called out to her.

She had likely heard the conversation.

“Yeah, take care of that. Just make sure you do my room and their rooms from the hallway control system. And while you’re at it, can you change our shrine birthplace setting?”

“Huh!?”

Asama reflexively voiced her surprise.

Masazumi and Horizon turned toward her.

“Is something the matter, Asama-sama?”

“No, it’s just that...well, she wants me to redo their birthplace setting...and change it even...”

“Huh? I don’t really get it,” said Toori. “What does that mean?”

“Well.” Asama nodded toward him. “It means to change Mouri’s primary shrine.”

It seemed to take a second for the meaning to sink in.

Masazumi eventually frowned, Horizon tilted her head, and the idiot...

“So that’s it! I’m impressed!”

“You understand, Toori-kun?”

“Huhh!? Course I do! What’s that skeptical look for!? I-it means, um, uhh, well...can you please read between the lines already?”

“Yes, yes.” Asama lowered her shoulders and then turned toward Terumoto. “Mouri’s current main shrine is on Hexagone Française land. I believe it is the Suga Shrine. It was built where Susanoo is said to have defeated Yamata no Orochi.”

“Testament. I want to change that main shrine to one Mouri holds here.”

“I assume this is a temporary thing because a nearby one will give you an advantage during the Kantou Liberation...but this will reduce your rights a fair bit, you know?”

“I don’t mind,” said Terumoto. “I’ve already discussed it with them. And it’s a long way from here to Mouri’s Suga Shrine. Hashiba has some high level ley line divine transmission technology, so we would be in serious trouble if they cut the Suga Shrine off from the network.”

Asama understood what she was saying.

No matter how largescale the backup, it could be unstable at a distance. And even smaller scale backup could be quite stable from nearby. When comparing the two, the latter would be the safer option.

But even so...

“Why ask the Asama Shrine?”

“I just wanted the help of a major Far Eastern shrine. You can communicate with the Suga Shrine over divine transmission and you can handle the process with the local shrine. Also, intermediaries are important in Shinto, right?”

That is true, thought Asama.

In both marriage and employment, intermediaries like matchmakers and referrals were important. Going between two different sides and ensuring no impurities formed between them was an important Shinto job.

So...

...Oh, so Houjou was an intermediary that brought Mouri here.

That directed Asama’s focus back toward Terumoto. *She’s stricter than I thought she would be.*

She did not say “surprisingly”, but did that mean she had been observing her properly? Or had she already felt that during the previous battle? Either way...

“Understood. I will be your intermediary and arrange for the change of shrines.”

“Oh? You can do that, Asama?”

“After Mikawa was lost, the large shrines like Atsuta and Ootsubaki were moved to the Musashi, so I have some experience in it. The method itself has been the same since ancient times, so I’ll be fine. There will be just one difficult

part.”

That was...

“Trying to keep Mouri’s privileges from being reduced any more than absolutely necessary.”

“Asama-sama, isn’t there anything you can do about that? Make it simple.”

Asama placed a hand on her chin and thought about Horizon’s question.

“Hmm...”

The change of shrine process had been the same since ancient times. That made it very difficult to find any way of intervening in it. But Horizon...

“Understood.” Sweat poured down her expressionless face. “I will provide you with snacks while you work. I have determined that something with gold in it would be best. Now, the real challenge will be figuring out how to make gold...”

“Wait, you’re headed in a very strange direction there, Horizon!”

“Hmm,” said Toori. “Then I think I’ll make something and bring it to you.”

“Eh?”

The fire had spread in an unexpected direction. Her thought had been to find a way to fulfill the request, not to ask for anything like this.

“Um, no, you don’t have to...”

“Great idea! We need to keep Tomo motivated, so please do, my king.”

Mitotsudaira said that as soon as she walked over after putting away her silver chain.

Asama: “Mito...!”

Asama sent a message to just the silver wolf who gave her a smiling sidelong glance. And...

Silver Wolf: “I saw you looking at me yesterday. The look on your face said you wanted a present. ...I don’t always like having everything for myself and Horizon seems all for it, so why not just go with it?”

She's unstoppable when her mom isn't around... thought Asama.

"I'm not telling you to do it here and now," said Terumoto with a smile. "You can figure it out down there. Once we land, I would appreciate it if you made this a priority."

Once she said that, the sky slowly began to move.

The diplomatic ship was descending.

...Honestly...

Asama had more work to do, but she also felt like she had more reasons to be in a good mood.

Then Masazumi clapped her hands together and spoke.

"Okay, we managed to confirm our situation and objective here. But even if we do handle the Siege of Odawara with duels, we still have to figure out what to do about the Tensho Jingo Conflict and the Siege of Bitchu Takamatsu Castle."

"In that case," said Ujinao. "How about we hold a meeting on the Musashi this evening to discuss the number of duels for the Siege of Odawara and how to handle our various interests in this war? Also..."

Also...

"I suggest we include the Siege of Bitchu Takamatsu Castle in the Siege of Odawara's duels. This is all a pain, so it seems best to use the same rules for everything."

Chapter 25: Cheerful Girls Making Preparations

第二十五章

『準備回りの華やぎ娘』



戦う前にあるのは
一息ではなく
合わせようとする呼吸
配点 (心配)

Before a battle

You do not take a breather

You take a breath to bring everything in order

Point Allocation (Worry)

There was a large wheat field below the summer sun.

It was a vast area. A forest created a dark shadow beyond the distant horizon and mountains rose from beyond even that.

The field contained so very much wheat.

The shadows of waterways occasionally cut across its green surface.

And a few giant forms were stopped on that vast wheat field.

They were aerial ships.

The red and black ships dotted the plain from south to north.

Countless black transport ships moved around those giant ships and traveled to and from the north.

To the north was the silhouette of a manmade structure beyond the plain. It was a long horizontal wall that surrounded a city.

Occasionally, some silhouettes could be seen moving around that city wall.

They were clearly larger than the wall itself.

“Those are the reinforcements for Hexagone Française. Is it a dragon unit?”

A voice spoke in the center of the wheat field.

A solidly-built figure stood in that expanse of green. He was a man with a single horn on his head. He was...

“I, Miyoshi Seikai, cannot help but remember our Sanada land when I see that many dragons. Goodness gracious.” He pulled out a *tanzaku* and jotted something down with a portable brush. “ ‘In the distance *below the summer sun* dragon and man are no different *ah* just like the tranquil days of yore.’ ”

He nodded.

“Yes, objective and vibrant. None of the manga-like focus on excitement and nothing more.”

With that, he looked ahead.

There was a giant ship there.

It was not nearby. It was a long way away, but its great size threw off his sense of distance.

“To me it appears so distant. But to the Azuchi, I must appear so close.”

Transport ships were moving around the Azuchi.

While loaded with cargo, those black ships flew incessantly northward before returning once more.

There were more than just a few of them. They came in many sizes and had numbers greater than a hundred.

A closer look showed more of them arriving from the south.

The cargo on the southern ships was brought here and that cargo was then carried from here to Paris.

Seikai placed a hand on his forehead as he viewed them.

“Are those carrying the materials needed to flood Paris?”

This is a major operation, thought Seikai.

But Paris was a large city. Flooding it would be difficult without going to this extent.

And he knew what to be most impressed with.

...The fact that Hashiba has the power to pull it off.

A single commander was going to submerge an entire city in a short period of time.

That meant a single commander's power and authority would complete the largescale construction needed to surround an entire city.

For Hashiba, creating or destroying a city would likely be a simple task.

“I see...”

Seikai and the others had viewed the battle at Magdeburg from the Musashi.

Hashiba had fought to destroy an entire city there.

...They were not done with that and that was not all they could do.

They had flooded Magdeburg by damming up the river with transport ships.

They would likely do that again here, but the construction of the embankment around them was going to be on a larger scale.

That way no one could find fault with their history recreation.

They had made it to this point by gradually building up trust, connections, and management techniques.

“Why?” muttered Seikai as he viewed the transport ships traveling through the sky. “Why don’t they simply ignore the history recreation when they have so much power?”

Hashiba’s policy here seemed clear.

“They will not allow anyone to find fault in their actions.”

That was why they followed the Testament and did not hesitate to accept losses.

But, thought Seikai. Why are they so insistent on that?

“Because...”

Sweat dripped from his forehead to his right cheek as he said that.

It was hot.

Because it was summer. Below the wavy shadows created by the wheat, the morning earth retained some of its chill.

But that would not last much longer. The earth would soon heat up and the temperature would quickly rise.

Besides, he thought as he viewed the vast wheat field.

...The wheat really should have been harvested by now.

Since it had so much green during summer, it had to be the second crop of the year. But since it was a little too early for a second crop...

“Hexagone Française is working to mass-produce food, aren’t they?” said Seikai. “They are a powerful nation, after all.”

...Some of the nations are looking to the future like this.

No, most nations had to be doing that. Even the small ones were thinking several steps ahead in order to survive.

But something seemed off about Hashiba. They strictly followed the history recreation and they did not hesitate to accept losses.

“They are ensuring no one can find fault in them... but what are they looking ahead to with that?”

Seikai nodded.

And he finally wiped the sweat from his brow.

“They may not be all that different from us...”

The Ten Braves were currently enemies of Hashiba.

But they would eventually side with Hashiba and fight the 2nd Siege of Ueda and the Osaka Campaign.

So they could not simply face Hashiba as an enemy. However...

“Here I, Seikai, am planning to support Hexagone Française.”

He had effectively fled from Sanada. This could easily cost him his inherited name.

But he had a reason for it.

...This is the reason we are Unneeded.

They had once planned to work directly for Hashiba.

They had been the 7 elites chosen as Hashiba’s Seven Spears. Including the others around them, there had been 10 in all. They had attempted to inherit those names, but they had failed.

They had fought the current Ten Spears and been defeated.

After that, they had wandered and been accepted by Sanada.

They had taken the Celestial Dragons as their teachers in order to inherit new names.

It was that past that made them who they were now.

But there was one question that had to be on all of their minds.

“What would happen if we fought the Ten Spears now?”

...Now, then... It is not like me to think of such things.

But their Great Teacher had joined Hexagone Française’s forces as if taking the lead for them.

As if he intended to strike back at the people who had robbed his students of their future.

...Only failed students would allow him to do this alone.

And Seikai was the oldest of them.

So if anyone was to do this, it had to be him.

So here he was. And...

“Taking this ship on would not be fun.”

He looked up at one ship of the Azuchi and breathed in. And then...

“I should probably do some recon as a gift for our Great Teacher.”

With that, he vanished.

There was nothing in that vast wheat field to hide him and none of the wheat was pushed out of the way. However...

“———”

A humming voice with the rhythm of a chanted sutra could be heard moving west, toward the Azuchi’s lead ship.

“Um, Fukushima-sama?”

Kiyomasa called out to her right as she ran.

They were near the Azuchi's lead ship.

The wheat had been harvested and the exposed ground had been packed down by the repeated landings of transport ships. The cargo had initially been loaded and unloaded with lifts in the LORO method, but now they were using the RORO method.

While that was carried out, Kiyomasa and Fukushima ran along a walking path marked out with rope.

They were not in a hurry anywhere. They were simply running to maintain their physical condition.

They had already done this once in the early morning, but the way they held their bodies changed in the afternoon.

During summer, the rising temperature loosened their muscles.

To adjust and tighten their muscles, they ran. They could normally perform this conditioning with spells and divine protections, but this was enemy territory.

They wanted to familiarize themselves with the local weather.

...Or is that a sign of how worried I am?

Kiyomasa followed that thought with spoken words.

"Unlike in the morning, the sun will shine on us when we move to starboard, so be careful."

Each of the Azuchi's ships was about a kilometer long. Taking a wide circle around it was a 2km run. They were making two circuits at their own pace, but...

"Fukushima-sama?"

The other girl was not responding.

Kiyomasa saw that Fukushima was staring forward and a bit down as she ran. She was obviously lost in thought. And...

...Oh?

The ground at her feet was shimmering.

The wavering light looked a lot like a heat haze and it was not an illusion.

While she ran, Fukushima would sink lightly down on her ankles and have her toes cross from either side. Each time, she attempted to activate Headfirst Fall, her acceleration spell.

“————”

But she would cancel it partway and it would vanish.

That light shook the air and formed a heat haze in the shadow of the Azuchi.

A large wagon carrying materials passed them by.

It contained materials for the scaffolding that would be used to construct the walls for flooding Paris. Metal beams stuck out onto the walking path, so Kiyomasa moved out of the way.

Fukushima, however, did not.

She lightly twisted her body and continued facing forward.

“...”

“Fukushima-sama!”

Kiyomasa was sure it would hit her.

...Huh?

But then she saw something.

Fukushima’s body passed right through the scaffolding material that stuck out to the side.

It was not that it did not hit her.

To Kiyomasa, it looked like Fukushima had continued running forward, hit the material, and yet “passed through” it.

...Eh?

She did not understand, so...

“Fukushima-sama!?”

There was a sharp tone in her voice now.

Just then, Fukushima’s shoulders shook.

“What is it, Kiyo-dono!?”

Rapidly turning around was a mistake.

She slammed the side of her head into a different metal beam that had been passing by behind her.

With a dull sound, Fukushima crouched down. The cart’s driver looked back.

“Hm? ...Huh? Did I hit you, 1st Spear!?”

He sounded so confused because that should never have happened.

But Kiyomasa recalled what had happened just before that: Fukushima had strangely “passed through” the beam.

...What was that ?

This was not the time to analyze that.

But she realized they were gathering even more attention.

Now was not the time to be worrying everyone. The Spears were the foundation of everyone’s attack and the core of their defense, so she bowed to them with a smile.

“No, her hair just got tangled with mine a bit.”

They all nodded in understanding.

An elderly man shouted over at her while loading a cart with flowers to decorate the inside of the ship.

“You’re just the epitome of grace, aren’t you!?”

The driver and everyone else laughed at that and Fukushima stood back up.

“My apologies. ...Please continue working immediately.”

“Testament!”

They all replied in unison and resumed moving.

Kiyomasa looked to the transport ships rising into the sky and sighed.

“Um, Fukushima-sama?”

“Huh?”

“You dodged the metal beam sticking out from the cargo passing by, didn’t you?”

Fukushima looked back at her with no change to her expression.

Her shapely eyes remained motionless for a few seconds, and then...

“...Huh?”

She looked troubled. Also...

“I dodged a metal beam? ...But I hit it.”

“No, not that one. You dodged the first one that was in front of you.”

“Well, I do sometimes subconsciously dodge on reflex.”

...Umm, that’s not what I meant...

How was she to explain this?

“You see...”

“What is it?”

Kiyomasa held her left arm up in front of her eyes.

“Think of my arm as the metal beam.”

“And what did it do?”

“Testament. It approached your forehead like this.”

Kiyomasa pressed the arm against her forehead but moved her head forward, as if pushing the arm out of the way.

“You went like this and seemed to slip through it or pass through it, so you ended up on the other side.”

Fukushima watched as Kiyomasa pressed her arm to her forehead a few times.

They were below the summer sky, but also in the giant shadow formed by the

Azuchi. And after a while...

“...Pff.”

“Y-you don’t have to laugh at me.”

Kiyomasa felt heat rising in her cheeks as she clenched her fists and protested.

Fukushima held her right hand to her mouth and raised her left hand to say “wait”.

“N-no, Kiyo-dono, I am just not sure what thou mean by that...”

“I’m asking you because I don’t understand it myself.”

“So thou did that because thou truly do not understand?”

That seemed to really tickle her funny bone. She turned her back for a while, but eventually turned back around and took a breath.

“My apologies. I am really sorry about that. I am sure thou only did that because thou are worried for me.”

“Yes, yes. That’s right, that’s right. That’s the entire point of this, Fukushima-sama.”

Kiyomasa knew she was glaring and Fukushima cleared her throat.

“Hm. I truly must apologize because I do not remember that at all.”

“...It isn’t something you were practicing?”

“Not intentionally, no.”

Fukushima took two steps closer and then took Kiyomasa’s arm.

“Was it...like this?”

She took the appropriate stance with Kiyomasa’s arm as the metal beam.

They were facing each other with Kiyomasa posed like she was elbowing the other girl.

But she figured this would help explain it, so she did so.

“Testament. And you seemed to pass right through this arm...”

“Hm,” said Fukushima as she moved forward without warning. She was leaning forward a bit and she took a step forward while holding up Kiyomasa’s arm.

“Oh?”

Her face ended up in Kiyomasa’s chest.

Everyone working in the area turned back at once.

6: “Work to port seems to be falling behind. ...#1 and #2, any idea why?”

Kiyo-Massive: “...Uhhh, not a clue. No.”

AnG: “Hey, the connection is back. Wa-...”

Kimee: “...Hm? Did she get cut off again? Well, whatever. Am I connected?”

Llaf: “Ohh, welcome back. But thy connection does seem unstable.”

6: “Just do your work...”

Hachisuka-sama just scolded us, thought Kiyomasa.

...But I really messed up my positioning this time.

It was only natural for *that* to happen if they were facing each other head on.

Fukushima looked up at her.

“Kiyo-dono, that would have been a disaster if thou had activated the Giant Breasts Defense.”

“Unfortunately, I don’t seem to have that skill...”

Kiyomasa moved alongside Fukushima and held her left arm out in front of the other girl’s face as if throwing a backhand blow.

“Getting back to what happened before...I think it was *like this*.”

“I see. So the metal beam moved in from the front...and I moved forward.”

Fukushima must have been pondering her previous mistake because she did

not move herself.

Instead, Kiyomasa moved her arm toward Fukushima's forehead.

"The beam moved like this..."

She moved her arm right up to Fukushima's forehead.

It made contact.

She held it there for a few seconds and noticed the sweat on their skin.

"Well?"

She removed her arm and saw Fukushima's wrinkled brow below it. The girl tilted her head.

"———"

Fukushima did not seem to understand, but Kiyomasa did not understand either.

"Do you have any ideas?"

"...Eh? Oh, Kiyo-dono, can thou do it once more?"

"Testament. ...Like this?"

"No, um, with more force this time."

Wouldn't that be dangerous? she thought as she swung her arm.

She stopped at the last second.

She had made an accelerated swing of her arm with the hand relaxed. But Fukushima stared unblinkingly at it as it stopped before her eyes.

She was highly focused.

After a while she nodded. And...

"Kiyo-dono, please swing all the way through with that same force."

"Testament. ...Like this, right?"

She plans to really do it, she realized while swinging her arm.

She intended to swing her arm all the way through.

So she went for it.

And she indeed swung all the way through.

...Eh!?

She heard the sound of bone being struck and felt an impact in her elbow.

The hit caused Fukushima's knees to give out below her.

"Ow."

The problem was that Kiyomasa had not expected to actually hit. The nerves of her elbow seemed to short-circuit because a powerful tingling raced up her arm and through her shoulder.

They both crouched down and held their forehead or elbow for a few seconds.

"K-Kiyo-dono, thou are more skilled in martial arts than I knew."

"N-no, I just train my arms a lot."

"Umm, what are you two doing?"

Katagiri walked up.

Katagiri had been going for a run.

He lived a primarily indoor life, but the past few days had taught him it was important to build up some strength. After all...

...I want to be manly...!

He knew a few days was not going to make a huge difference, but he hoped doing this long term would help him grow taller and stronger.

By the time he had grown tall and built up some muscle, he expected the Warring States period would be over. Then he could go to Musashi.

...Or that was my plan anyway.

"What are you doing?"

The two girls here had much more experience training their bodies, but they

were crouched down on the ground.

The two of them had fought an intense battle just the other day, so he wondered what had happened.

“Have your injuries gotten worse?”

“N-no, that’s not it at all.”

Kiyomasa stood up and rotated her arm so he could see. Beyond her, Fukushima also stood up and fixed her collar. And...

“Katagiri-dono, are thou out on a run?”

“Testament. I had some things to think about and I thought I could start training my body.”

“My, are you planning to fight on the front line?”

Katagiri thought about that one.

...I have to get to the point where I can say I am.

A boy needs to be able to show off, he thought as he answered Kiyomasa.

“Testament. I am thinking about going to the front line if necessary.”

As soon as he said that, a wave of chatter spread through their surroundings. The voices quickly spread outwards in a game of telephone.

“Hey! Katagiri-san says he’s going to the front line!”

“Ehh!? Katagiri-san is coming with us to the front line!?”

“Yeah! Katagiri-san is coming to the front!”

That exchange and cries of surprise made a full circuit of the area around the Azuchi.

After a while, the wave of voices arrived back from the other side.

Kuro Take: “Katagiri-kun? What is this I’m hearing about you ‘coming thrice and covering Mori-kun with lassi’? Some weird sex thing?”

□□凸: “No! How did it end up like that!?”

“Now, now.” Kiyomasa smiled bitterly and waved her right hand back and

forth. “This just means everyone is worried about you, Katagiri-kun.”

“I want to be the kind of guy people don’t have to be worried about!”

“Testament.” Kiyomasa nodded and opened a *lernen figur*. “Takenaka-sama? Katagiri-kun apparently wants to go to the front line.”

“Yay, super high damage!” replied Takenaka on the *lernen figur*.

...Ehhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?

This was the first he had heard of this. Or rather, he had not said anything that definitive.

And what was Takenaka’s response about?

“W-wait just a second! What’s this about me and super high damage!?”

“Eh?” said Takenaka. “You promise you won’t run away if I tell you?”

...I don’t like the sound of that...!

But someone else spoke up to bring an end to that conversation.

It was Fukushima and she took a breath first.

“Even if Katagiri-dono is showing some fighting spirit, isn’t sending him to the front line going a little too far?”

“...R-right!? That’s going a bit too far, isn’t it!?”

“Testament,” agreed Fukushima. She then placed a hand on her chin and looked at him. “So try not to push thyself too hard and work to accomplish only what thou can, Katagiri-dono.”

“But I’m still going?”

“Oh? You aren’t going?”

Kiyomasa looked and sounded truly surprised.

Then she lowered the ends of her eyebrows.

“Um, sorry. Was I mistaken when I said you would be going to the front line?”

Every part of Katagiri’s body and soul begged him to say “testament”, but...

...Kh.

He held back.

Because he had to be manly.

A real man could not fall back from the front line just because Kiyomasa was worried.

Yes, there were times when he had to make himself do something. That was his duty if he was to meet Musashi's lewd shrine maiden once more.

So I need to fill my heart with lewd shrine maiden power.

...There it is, there it is, there it is! It's rising from my imagination!

Okay, he thought while clenching his right fist in his heart.

"No, you were not mistaken. ...I will go to the front line!"

"Are thou serious, Katagiri-dono!?"

"I am!"

"We had thought the enemy would have their god of war unit on the front line, so we were planning to fortify our front line with spell barricades and have our main forces fall back. ...But thou will be going to the front line!"

...Ehhhhhhhhhhhh!?

Not only is this the first I've heard of that, but you're not even playing fair here! he thought to no one in particular.

Kuro Take: "Ohh... I think this is going to be even more brutal than I expected."

□□凸: "Please stop making this sound even worse than it is!"

Kimee: "Then let's look at just the facts: without us to bomb the enemy's front line, you might end up with a direct clash between both sides' front lines."

Just the facts was bad enough.

But he did have a thought about what he had heard.

□□凸: "Is the situation really that bad?"

6: "Are you dumb?"

Tsurugi: “Koroku! Don’t say that about Katagiri-kun! His brain has been producing tons of anxiety-inducing chemicals!”

□□凸: “Do I have no rights as a human being!?”

But Kiyomasa took a breath and spoke.

Kiyo-Massive: “We’re busy preparing for the flooding, so we haven’t given much thought to how exactly we will attack Paris. How much progress have we made?”

6: “About 30%. I’ll head out if need be. ...Genbu’s gravitational control can position and drive in the materials all at once.”

“More importantly,” said Koroku.

6: “#3 and #4, things are looking pretty touchy where you are.”

Koroku was referencing the situation in Kantou.

...What does that mean?

The information on Kantou had not reached them yet, but there was a reason Koroku knew about it.

6: “I was given administrative control over the transport ship fleet yesterday, so the high-level divine transmissions are reaching Genbu. According to those, the battles between Musashi, Houjou, and Mouri will primarily be done with duels. Is that right, Takenaka?”

Kuro Take: “Oh, drat... I was hoping to inform you only after they had worked things out a little more. Sorry about keeping you in the dark, Yoshiaki-kun and Wakisaka-san.”

Kimee: “Well, it’s definitely an annoying situation for us. And that’s really all we need to know.”

□□凸: “Um, what exactly does that mean?”

Katagiri tried asking.

It was Angie who answered him.

AnG: “It means Shouroku didn’t read the atmosphere...”

6: “I was just facing reality.”

Kimee: “Oh? But people look to reality either because it’s fun or because it’s worrying.”

6: “I’m aware of that and I’m not going to deny it.”

After a pause, Koroku continued.

6: “Thank you.”

Kimee: “For what?”

6: “For not using my younger age as an excuse to overlook that I failed to read the atmosphere.”

AnG: “Now you’re making me blush.”

6: “I wasn’t talking to you...!”

Fukushima raised her right hand beyond Katagiri’s *lernen figur*.

“What happened here and what does it mean?”

“Umm...”

How was he supposed to explain this? While he tried to come up with something, Kiyomasa smiled a little and did it for him.

“Hachisuka-sama caused Takenaka-sama some trouble by not reading the atmosphere, Yoshiaki-sama pointed out that she was doing so because she is worried, Hachisuka-sama thanked her, and Wakisaka-sama said she was blushing, but that was wrong.”

...I’m not sure that’s quite right!

But Fukushima crossed her arms and nodded.

“Koroku-dono is at a tricky age, isn’t she?”

It was a mystery how much had gotten through to her, but she seemed to have reached some kind of understanding.

And as the Ten Spears’ negotiator, Katagiri wanted as much information as he could get.

“So what happened in Kantou?”

AnG: “Is Tsugy there? ...Hey, did our connection just get a lot cleaner?”

6: “Genbu is amplifying the signal.”

AnG: “Way to go, Shouroku! You can eat the snacks in my room!”

6: “The key?”

AnG: “Let’s not go crazy. Just give up already!!”

That exchange was borderline incomprehensible, but scarily enough, it made sense to those two.

But the name Wakisaka had alluded to was one they knew well: Ootani Yoshitsugu.

He was a data entity created from a program and he was under Hashiba’s direct command. That made him very similar to the Ten Spears who acted as Hashiba’s personal warriors, but he worked as a representative of the “Hashiba forces”.

It was a lot like the Ten Spears were the Chancellor’s Officers and Ootani was a Committee Head.

He had only had his official release recently, but circumstances had meant his development period had been close to their training period. And...

Nari Nari Nari: “What was that about Ootani-kun?”

AnG: “Testament.”

Wakisaka answered.

AnG: “Koumon-sama took a running start and used a table to send Tsugy blasting off, causing the Keichou Campaign.”

Super Justice: “Not true! How can you lie like that when I am right here!?”

AnG: “...Kime-chan, Tsugy isn’t listening, so can you say something?”

Super Justice: “Indeed. I ask that you omit the complicated circumstances leading up to it and simply state the final result.”

“If you insist,” sent Yoshiaki.

Kimee: “The final result was as follows: Ootani exploded in the sky, causing the Keichou Campaign.”

Super Justice: “Not true...! No, that actually is true, but it is not a proper explanation!”

6: “Lame... Exploding in the sky... So lame...”

Super Justice: “It was an honorable explosion in the sky! We are discussing the moment in which justice failed, so how can you call it lame!?”

They’re having a tough time there too... realized Katagiri.

But Fukushima crossed her arms and spoke.

Llaf: “In other words, Ootani-dono exploded on a table and that means the Keichou Campaign?”

Kimee: “More or less.”

Super Justice: “Less! Very much less! ...Fine then. I will send you the report I wrote, so please check that!”

Llaf: “How long is it?”

Super Justice: “Testament. I wrote it in about 3 seconds, so assuming a piece of parchment holds 400 characters, it would be about 3000 pages. Even when accounting for I/O errors, you should be able to read it in about 5 seconds.”

6: “To be polite as possible, are you stupid?”

Super Justice: “Heh. It is illogical to call a program stupid. What about me do you think is stupid?”

6: “Your very existence.”

Super Justice: “N-no fair! Why am I responsible for something I have no control over!?”

He still isn’t used to how we do things, realized Katagiri.

But he sort of understood what Ootani was saying.

...The enemy is trying to liberate Kantou?

□□凸: “Which nation is attempting to carry out the Keichou Campaign?”

Super Justice: “Testament. ...All three: Mouri, Houjou, and Musashi. Tomorrow, they will be using duels to complete the Tensho Jingo Conflict, the Siege of Odawara, and the Siege of Bitchu Takamatsu Castle. Also...”

Also...

Super Justice: “It seems we will be able to read the details of those duels before long, but after they complete those duels tomorrow and exchange or distribute the resultant benefits, I believe they intend to begin the Keichou Campaign.”

Llaf: “What is the situation for Takigawa’s group?”

Kimee: “It doesn’t seem like she plans to contact us. And it would be difficult to forcibly contact her while she’s in Houjou territory. ...We do know that three of the Sanada Ten Braves have joined her and they will be fighting the 2nd Siege of Ueda alongside the other battles.”

Kiyo-Massive: “How will Yoshiaki-sama and Wakisaka-sama’s group be taking part?”

Kuro Take: “That’s going to be a bit tricky... If the Keichou Campaign is coming up, intervening in the Siege of Odawara might be dangerous. You aren’t equipped for back-to-back battles, are you?”

AnG: “Eh!? We have to head back that same day? But we haven’t had any fun yet!”

Kimee: “If we do head back, it will be after having some fun. ...Takenaka? It’s true we aren’t equipped for back-to-back battles. We mostly have equipment for one-on-one battles and anti-surface weapons, so we aren’t prepared at all for the Keichou Campaign that will probably involve a fleet battle leading into the Kantou Liberation. We’re in Shimoda south of Odawara, so if it does come to back-to-back battles, would it be faster to fly over to Edo to swap out equipment?”

Kuro Take: “We didn’t take any Technohexen equipment to Edo...”

AnG: “We can manage with some ether fuel Orei Metallo. Technohexen can do more than just fire coin bullets. It might have poor fuel efficiency, but there’s a lot we can do.”

Kuro Take: “Then sending you to Edo would be an option. I’ll make a decision after giving this more thought.”

Just as Katagiri saw those words on his *lernen figur*, a stir ran through the people transporting materials near the Azuchi.

“Waaahhh! Some ero ero is falling from the sky!!”

□□凸: “What are you doing, Takenaka-san!?”

Kuro Take: “Oh, sorry, sorry. I have so many tricky things to work out, so I stepped outside for some fresh air. But the Azuchi’s deck is just so high up. ... Ah, sorry. A little more to the right this time.”

“Waaaahhh! Now the ero ero is falling this way!”

Kiyo-Massive: “Takenaka-san! Please stop sending it overboard! You’re surprising everyone!”

They were usually up on the deck and out of the way, but it was certainly panic-inducing while down below.

The working students screamed and moved away from the ship.

6: “Hey! You’re delaying the work on the port side! Stay near the ship!”

It was awful through and through.

But there was nothing they could do about it, so Katagiri decided to end the conversation for now and let Takenaka make her decision about Kantou. However...

“Achoo!”

He had apparently grown chilled in the Azuchi’s shadow.

He wanted to be manly, but his sneeze sounded awfully childish to him.

...I need to pull myself together.

As he thought that, he saw Kiyomasa smile.

“You should probably hurry into the sun. There is something we would like to test out here.”

“What you were doing before?”

“Thou could say that, yes.”

“Waaaahhh! The ero ero is curving in the wind!”

It was a lot like a video game.

“They all have such excellent observational skills.”

“I’m getting used to all this and that’s worrying me...” said Katagiri.

It isn’t pleasant at all, he thought as he took a breath and resumed running.

“I’ll go on ahead! After completing a circuit, I think I’ll return to the ship and help Takenaka-san!”

“Things sure are lively there. Let’s keep up our work here while staying in touch with Takenaka.”

Yoshiaki took a breath and looked ahead.

There was a stone-paved slope leading downwards before her eyes and wooden buildings lined either side of it. She could see the ocean further down, but...

“With a name like Atami^[1], I was imagining a scorching sea, but it isn’t that at all. Right, Kime-chan?”

“They apparently suggested actually making it that way when remaking the ruins of the hot springs town into the modern style, but they rejected the idea. The other nations had to place their embassies here and the nonhumans of Oushuu would have had a hard time entering the ocean that way. Because a lot of them are from cold areas.”

“How do you know that?”

“Researching your destination is important, Ootani.”

“Testament,” replied Ootani at their feet.

He was in a Mouse form.

Angie would sometimes try to scoop him up without warning.

“Could you stop that?” he would ask. “I am not a toy.”

It was amusing how he would immediately dodge and run away.

They were currently in the diplomatic district of Atami.

...This place is surrounded by defense barriers to make it a noncombat area for diplomatic relations with other nations. But...

“There’s no one here.”

“Kantou still hasn’t calmed down since our Hashiba forces arrived. Diplomacy was always focused more in Edo than anywhere and there’s no point in moving their diplomats to Houjou with the Siege of Odawara approaching. ...If there is any reason to do diplomacy with Houjou now, it would be to work out where Houjou’s assets will end up after Odawara...”

“It seems Houjou intends to transfer most of it to Matsudaira,” said Ootani.

“It’s nice having an analyst who heard things on site.”

They descended the slope. Most of the buildings were recreations of the ruins using modern reinforced wood. They had apparently been inns originally, but most of them had small gates out front and functioned as embassies for the other nations.

...Are they also used as sanatoriums for Kantou and the surroundings areas?

She saw the names of Nanbu, Nitta, other small nations, and even some large reservations.

“There can’t be good turnaround with a bunch of sanatoriums packed in at one place. I saw two Satomi buildings earlier.”

“...They probably just think diplomacy is important even if Houjou is an enemy.”

They would sometimes pass by an automaton in charge of managing the city.

They were calm enough to exchange a bow with the automatons. In fact, the embassy they were staying at hired a lot of them.

“I hope Kanitama can make it.”

“She can receive a map via divine transmission once she arrives in Atami, so she should be fine.”

Angie seemed to be quite fond of that underclassman.

Yoshiaki thought that was a good thing because Angie could be quite shy.

...She's quick to categorize people into "like" and "dislike" categories.

Yoshiaki could not decide if she was jealous or not that Angie never noticed she was doing that. But...

"We need to do what we can too."

The ocean was visible at the bottom of the road.

The embankment of the ruins was long side to side and reinforced with stones.

They sensed the scent of salt water as they walked along.

"The ocean."

That dark blue expanse spread out horizontally.

...It looked bluer when seeing it from above.

But now it was so dark. And...

"We can see it."

From Atami in the north, they could see Odawara on the peninsula's coast which was visible to the left.

Odawara was surrounded by walls.

Angie viewed the walls that slowly rotated like a typhoon.

That was likely where Odawara Castle was located. Houjou and Mouri's aerial fleets were gathered there.

Those several hundred ships hovered in the sky around Odawara and moved to and from the surface below. That motion never ended and swapped out with other ships.

"The movement is slow, but it is a lot like a storm," noted Ootani.

"Angie, time to get to work." Yoshiaki opened a Magie Figur. "We saw this

from the sky too, but it was so distant. Let's assess their forces as much as we can from this fixed viewpoint. ...Ootani."

"Just tell me what you need."

"A local specialty!"

Tsugy looked up at her for just a second, and...

"———"

"Ah, Tsugy! You ignored me, didn't you!?"

"I do not want to talk about it, so leave me alone!! N-now, Yoshiaki-sama! Hurry up and give me a command!"

"Testament." Yoshiaki gave Ootani a command. "A local specialty."

Tsugy took off running and dug down into the ground. After a while, he came running up from an unexpected direction: behind them.

"Here it is! The Steamed Flipover, a Far Eastern pizza cooked using the heat of a hot spring!"

"Yeah, isn't there a rule that it can only be flipped over once? I bet you bought that from the Kansai embassy."

Angie and Yoshiaki took the food wrapped in bamboo leaf and found it was fairly warm. They unwrapped it to find the scent of the sauce, which suggested it was from a Mediterranean nation.

"Here, Tsugy."

"Unfortunately, I cannot eat solid objects," he said with a bow. "But I appreciate the thought."

"Okay, if you say so!"

"Angie, don't talk with your mouth full."

"Testament," she replied before noticing that Tsugy was eating an ether fuel snack.

She took a breath.

"Is there anything to do before Kanitama gets here?"

“Observing Houjou and Mouri to analyze their forces. And relaying divine transmissions between Edo and Hashiba’s unit. We have to work with Edo to keep an eye on the movements of the anti-Hashiba aerial fleets in the Edo region.”

“Is your aerial knowledge another reason you two were sent here?” asked Ootani.

“Testament. ...After a while, we’ll fly to the west of the peninsula.”

Angie peeled back the bamboo leaf to expose the Far Eastern pizza as she thought about Yoshiaki’s words.

...The other side of the peninsula...

“That’s a disputed region thanks to the fall of Takeda, right? Until the Tensho Jingo Conflict, anyway.”

“Testament. We need to see what the surrounding clans are doing. ...Angie, you spotted a few bases on the way here, right?”

So she had noticed.

That made Angie a little happy, but also bashful.

“I was staring blankly down at the ground and I just happened to see some odd shadows and lights in the mountains and forests.”

“Once the Siege of Odawara begins, those will be used to monitor the Houjou region and wait for the chance to make their move. So...”

Yoshiaki opened a Magie Figur.

It was a camera and it was set up to amplify the brightness for use at night.

“This is the compression type that Weiss Hexen excel at. I’ll set these up in the sky, Angie, so you give me the locations. I’ll make it look like I’m out on patrol as a mere precaution and activate them with a time delay so they won’t notice.”

“We have so much to do.”

“We do,” agreed Yoshiaki. And, “Ootani, you infiltrate the diplomatic district’s divine transmission system and see what the other nations are doing. You don’t have to actually read the contents.”

“Ohh, there’s actually a job for you, Tsugy! Now you can earn your keep!”

“I came here to work!”

“Wasn’t it for justice?”

“Y-yes, I am glad to see you understand!”

The way he cleared his throat showed that even data entities were living beings.

But then Yoshiaki’s shoulders drooped.

“Yeah, that’s probably about it.”

Once she had jotted down notes on the jobs they had to do, she finally faced forward.

The ocean was there, but a turn to the left showed the walls of Odawara along the coast.

“Takigawa-san’s group is beyond that fleet. ...It doesn’t look like we’ll able to drop by to say hi.”

“And yet we could fly that distance in just two minutes.”

“Shall I make a visit?” asked Ootani.

“You can’t. The Kanie Castle is a Houjou ship. Their divine transmission line uses the Houjou local god, so your infiltration would set off some alarms.”

“Then when will we meet up with Takigawa-san?”

Good question, thought Angie.

...A this rate, it would probably be during the Keichou Campaign.

Originally, they were supposed to intrude in the Siege of Odawara and support Takigawa there.

But since they could not contact Takigawa, they could not arrange things in advance. Since they did not know her intentions, their plan had been to let her fight as she wished while they supported her from the outside.

“If we thought of it as a rescue operation, we would fly in from above. And while we drew the enemy’s attention by charging in from above, Kanitama

would move in from below. I had thought we could do it like that.”

But things had changed.

It was clear now that this would be more than just the Siege of Odawara.

Fighting both the Siege of Odawara and the Keichou Campaign would require the appropriate preparations.

And they had received further news about the Siege of Odawara they had hoped to force their way into: “They’re planning to use duels...”

“Does that mean everything we discuss here could be entirely invalidated?”

“Testament. ...We won’t be able to do anything about Odawara or Takigawasan. Since Ootani already went and warned them once, we’ll have a hard time saying anything to Musashi while they play Hashiba’s part. ...Perhaps we should make a complaint when they determine the rules for the duels.”

“This is all because I failed to stop them when I intervened earlier...” said Ootani.

“You take things too seriously, Tsugy. Letting them know that Kime-chan and I are watching was more than enough.”

Despite what she said, Angie was not sure what they would do. Then Yoshiaki smiled and spoke.

“Angie? At times like this, we have to find what it is we need to do. Then we do whatever it is we *can* do. And we keep doing it. That’s the only way to change the situation.”

“What if it changes for the worse?”

“Making sure that doesn’t happen is one of the things we need to do.”

Yoshiaki then shoved the contents of her bamboo leaf wrapper into her mouth.

...She’s the composed type, but she’s actually more focused on speed than staying calm.

While Angie thought that, Yoshiaki turned toward her again.

“What is it, Angie?”

“Heh heh heh.” Angie gave a nasal laugh and mimicked Yoshiaki’s previous warning. “Don’t talk with your mouth full.”

Yoshiaki’s bitter smiles were always so wonderful.

Angie noticed a smile on her own lips as well. And despite Ootani’s tilted head...

“I bet the others are saying things like this too.”

Kiyomasa lightly stretched her arms and her whole body.

She filled her lungs with the summer afternoon air in the Azuchi’s shadow.

“Okay, Fukushima-sama. We never solved that mystery, but let’s finish our run for now. Katagiri-kun already went on ahead.”

“Testament. The battle is tomorrow, so we must not lose our focus.”

My, my, thought Kiyomasa.

...But you were distracted because you were too focused.

However, she left that unsaid.

The girl was not aware of it, so telling her would only make her hesitate further.

So Kiyomasa remained silent and nodded back. Fukushima calmly lined up alongside her.

“———”

And they began to run. They stepped forward to run next to the materials being transported.

Their first few steps were slow, but they soon picked up speed to match the length of their paces.

They passed through the people’s shadows once more and then Fukushima spoke.

“Kiyo-dono.”

“Testament. What is it?”

“Later, thou will be using the ship’s pool for rehabilitation from thy injury, won’t thou?”

“Oh, yes. I do things like create a platform on the water and balance on top of it.”

“Testament. I would like to spar with thee then. ...Lately, I have felt somewhat lacking in strength.”

Kiyomasa smiled a bit that Fukushima had chosen now to reveal that she had lost confidence in herself after their defeat. Because while they ran, Kiyomasa was the only one she could tell.

Of course, Kiyomasa was also the only one with the skill to train properly with Fukushima. However...

“I’m something of an unconventional spear user. If anything, I’m more of a sword user.”

“No, Kiyo-dono. Thou are the more conventional one between us.”

They argued over who was more unconventional until they reached the bow.

There they entered the sunlight. Their bodies warmed up as they ran alongside the materials being transported.

“Testament. Then let us spar up top after this run.”

“Testament. I look forward to it. Then we can take a break at the festival on the deck.”

Just as Fukushima said that, Kiyomasa noticed something.

...Oh?

A cart carrying materials was moving alongside them. But...

...That’s strange.

They had made their way around the bow.

The bow was pointed toward Paris. Since the materials were meant for the flooding of Paris, they should all have been bound for the bow.

So why had these followed them all the way around the bow?

...Did we have any materials being sent needlessly around like that?

Kiyomasa looked at the cart of materials.

She recognized the person in the driver's seat.

It was a familiar face.

But it had been so long that she could not recall the person's name. And she was afraid to be mistaken, so she asked the others.

Kiyo-Massive: "Um, everyone? Do you remember that group of 10 that, um, we fought a few years back?"

6: "Himeji's Yakiniku Three Musketeers?"

Kiyo-Massive: "No, those were ad campaign characters for a yakiniku shop. Fukushima-sama soloed them all and there were only 3 of them."

AnG: "Then do you mean Nagahama's Eight Fish Legions?"

Kiyomasa: "I remember a drunk Takenaka...-san saying 'Eh? The Eight Wish Legions?' and challenging them, but I don't think that's who I mean."

6: "Those were so hard to tell apart since their names were all 'Fish-sama', 'Fish-shi', 'Fish-san', and so on."

Black Wolf: "I think it was just that we defeated them before we could hope to learn which was which..."

Kuro Take: "Umm, then was it the Eight Swordsmen of Roman History?"

Kiyo-Massive: "Their catchphrase was 'we are dying to discover the best parts of Rome', but they were discovered as corpses in some catacombs on the first day of the duels which made their catchphrase literally true."

Kimee: "Yeah, I doubt they meant it like that..."

That third one had even had an appropriate connection to Roman history, but that was not what Kiyomasa was looking for here. Also, they seemed to deal with numbered groups a lot. Of course, they were one themselves.

□□凸: "If it was someone we fought, then wouldn't it be the other candidates

for the Seven Spears?”

Kiyo-Massive: “Testament! That’s it. Thank you very much. ...I couldn’t think of it since we took that position for ourselves.”

□□凸: “You’re welcome. But, Kiyomasa-san, what about them?”

Kiyo-Massive: “Well, Miyoshi Seikai Nyuudou is right here next to us.”

Almost Everyone: “...Then he’s an intruder!!”

Eh? thought Kiyomasa.

Kiyo-Massive: “U-um, aren’t the Sanada Ten Braves on Hashiba’s side?”

Kuro Take: “But we didn’t call for them here.”

6: “Why is he here?”

“Then,” said Fukushima outside the divine transmission. “Why not ask him?”

“Good idea...”

Kiyomasa tried asking as she ran.

“Um, Miyoshi Nyuudou?”

When she called out to him, he turned around in the driver’s seat.

“Testament. ...What is it?”

It really is him. Thank goodness, thought Kiyomasa as she got right to the point.

“Why are you here?”

“...That would be a long story.”

“Could you sum it up for me?”

“Fine then.” He nodded. “I arrived here to find two young girls confirming their mutual friendship with a run. I caught the scent of youth and decided to bask in that lively atmosphere.”

Hearing that, Kiyomasa nodded once.

Then she breathed in and shouted at the top of her lungs.

“Intruder!!”

Chapter 26: Staller on a Curved Path

第二十六章

『曲がり道の失速者』



道を間違うのではない
間違う道に入り込んだのだ
配点 (夏の暑さ)

I did not go the wrong way

I started down the wrong path

Point Allocation (Summer Heat)

Kiyomasa saw Miyoshi Nyuudou frantically wave his hands side to side.

“P-please wait! You are jumping to conclusions!”

He seemed to have something to say for himself.

...I suppose Sanada is technically part of Hashiba's forces...

Kiyomasa sighed and asked another question while still running.

“What is the meaning of this?”

“Testament. Due to some connections from my past, I have sided with Hexagone Française and I stopped by here to perform some espionage on the way there.”

“Intruder!!”

“P-please wait! You are jumping to conclusions!”

He seemed to have something to say for himself.

“For one thing, Hashiba and Hexagone Française have yet to properly open hostilities!”

That was true. They were of course still enemies, but it was worth considering how to handle this situation.

Kiyomasa sighed and asked another question while still running.

“What is the meaning of this?”

“Testament. I will eventually be your enemy, so I came here for some espionage and found some young girls confirming their mutual friendship with a run. I caught the scent of youth and-...”

“Intruder!!”

“P-please wait! You are jumping to conclusions! I am no one suspicious! I

merely arrived for some espionage and felt my heart flutter at the sight of some young girls!”

“Intruder!!”

“Please calm down! If you do, I am sure you will understand how pure my heart is! Young girls, youth, and a conversation while running! Ahh, how could I not feel my heart flutter!?”

“Kiyo-dono, how about we beat him up now?”

“Testament!” she agreed while Seikai whipped the horse drawing his cart.

The cart quickly accelerated.

“Ah. You’re trying to get away, aren’t you?”

“If my words cannot convince you, I have no other choice!”

Seikai stood up in the accelerated cart’s driver’s seat and swung his arm. He swung it toward the girls as they quickly picked up speed.

“Farewell, pure souls...!”

“W-wait! That cart is stolen!”

“Ha ha ha. We shall meet again tomorrow!”

A metal beam sticking out from a pile of materials hit Seikai on the back of the head.

With a solid sound, his body flipped through the air and over the materials loaded on his own cart.

He fell off.

But Kiyomasa and Fukushima had only just picked up speed.

They had to slam on the brakes when their enemy met this unexpected fate.

But by the time they stopped, they had already passed him by and were even further away from him than before.

“Oh, no...!”

The surrounding students were not warriors, so they could not capture Miyoshi Nyuudou.

So Kiyomasa turned around and ran. Fukushima was right there alongside her.

“Kh...!”

And she accelerated.

“Headfirst Fall...!”

Fukushima used Headfirst Fall for a short dash that quickly filled the gap between her and Miyoshi Nyuudou.

Miyoshi Nyuudou hit the ground rolling, stood back up, and began running once he noticed her.

...He is surprisingly fast!

He was a ninja.

Fukushima was a samurai. Based on their combat styles, he would be faster on his feet than her. So if she was to catch up...

“...”

She had to use Headfirst Fall.

She needed to catch up in a hurry. If she could delay him by just a bit, Kiyomasa could arrive in time.

...Of course, we are fortunate that we can fight him as a pair.

After all, they had no weapons.

Miyoshi Nyuudou, on the other hand, did. He appeared unarmed, but...

...Here it comes!

He swung his arm toward them as he ran.

That thick demonic arm contained an emblem tattoo. That black pattern formed writing when he swung his arm and twisted his muscles.

“Sermon Cannon!!”

Ether light raced along his arm and left his hand as a glowing projectile.

In response...

...Right!

Fukushima dodged. As the bullet passed her by, she deflected it to the left. It hit some materials being transported and exploded.

The bursting light and the blast itself were weak, but it made a lot of noise and the surrounding Azuchi people finally noticed what was happening.

“...Enemy attack!?”

The workers were only the rear guard being used to transport materials.

Most of those who could actually fight had been sent to defend the levee construction.

...So we have to do something here.

Fukushima had a sudden thought.

Llaf: “Takenaka-sama, were thou the one to determine the distribution of combat personnel here?”

Kuro Take: “Oh! So you noticed my excellent job, did you? Is there some kind of problem?”

Kiyo-Massive: “At least leave some guards here...!”

6: “More importantly, stop delaying work on the starboard side as well...!!”

AnG: “Calm down, Shouroku. Not that I know how hard you’re all working there.”

...That is very true!

But the situation was what it was.

Everyone had reflexively come to a stop.

They were unsure if there was any danger nearby them.

If they had been trained, they would be able to make a few different decisions. They would immediately decide whether to fall back to safety or to defend against the danger.

But if they had not received combat training...

...After hesitating, someone will be unable to bear the pressure and they will flee.

That would be dangerous. Everyone would think “me too”, seek that “uncertain safety”, and begin moving every which way.

So before that happened...

“...!”

Fukushima accelerated between the stopped people.

Her eyes were focused on her enemy.

Everyone had stopped and become obstacles, but he was slipping his large body between them.

It was like water.

The more obstacles there were, the faster he seemed to move.

And as Fukushima pursued him...

“Kh...”

She was hurrying, but...

...My movements are rough!

She grazed people and dug up the dirt beneath her.

Part of her thought that was fine. That was just how her acceleration worked. After all...

“Headfirst Fall...!”

It had its origins in Minamoto Yoshitsune’s surprise attack.

Yoshitsune had appeared on a cliff behind the enemy formation and, as everyone else thought about taking a detour around, she had jumped down from the cliff. It was a technique for relying on your horse to descend a cliff. So if Fukushima was using that to accelerate...

...Of course it is going to be rough.

It was a wild technique.

But, she thought. Headfirst Fall provides a falling acceleration focused on speed, so it should be used by the person in the lead.

It was not a technique for use in a crowded area. So...

“...Now, then.”

Fukushima sought to reach “the lead”.

Kiyomasa saw something as she ran: Fukushima jumped as she ran out ahead.

...Oh, dear.

It was a great leap. The girl in a black track suit soared up onto some materials being transported.

And Fukushima placed her left foot on those materials.

A moment later, she disappeared.

...Headfirst Fall!

She had poured almost all of her strength into acceleration.

As if to prove it, she appeared atop some materials a short distance away and then vanished again.

She next appeared on the back of a carthorse and then on the roof of a materials storehouse.

“—————”

I can't keep up with her, thought Kiyomasa.

Strengthening her body with a spell simply was not enough.

She was clearly following “after” Fukushima, not following “along with” her.

This of course meant Fukushima would catch up to the enemy, but also...

Kiyo-Massive: “Fukushima-sama! You’re moving too far out ahead!”

She called out to her, but...

“—————”

There was no response.

...Not again!

Yes again.

Fukushima was focused just like during their run earlier.

She must have been thinking about something because she was failing to monitor her situation.

This time, she was probably focused on pursuing the enemy.

During training, taking time to think was important.

But at the moment...

“...!”

A stir ran through the surrounding people as they noticed Seikai and Fukushima.

They began to move. Some cried out in surprise and others in confusion.

“———!!”

The frightened and panicked crowd got in Kiyomasa’s way.

Fukushima realized she had caught up to the enemy.

They were on a waterway. It was a small artificial river that passed through the wheat field.

It was about 5 meters wide and about a meter lower than the wheat field on either side.

The water was less than 10 centimeters deep and small stones were lined up below the water.

This was probably the “path” Miyoshi Nyuudou had used to approach the Azuchi. He kicked up the water as he ran about 10 meters ahead of her.

She heard something from the Azuchi behind her while she kept up the pursuit.

“———”

Everyone was raising their voices after finally noticing the chase.

Fukushima initially interpreted their distance from the Azuchi as distancing him from the work site.

That meant the enemy could no longer do damage to the others or to the Azuchi.

She was also well aware that leaving the Azuchi increased the risk to her. After all, she had no weapons and she was lightly equipped. She was also short on spells and divine protections.

She told herself she had to give up the chase after he had made it a certain distance away.

...As long as I keep that in mind, I should be fine.

She would not pursue him too far.

Of course, she had achieved impressive results by continuing the pursuit during the battle against the gods of war on the transport ship. So she decided she had to pursue and approach him to a certain extent.

So she did so. And...

“————”

Miyoshi Nyuudou accelerated.

He looked back her way and his narrowed eyes definitely focused in on her.

She knew why he had looked back: The waterway bent to the left up ahead.

The waterway was a level lower than the surrounding wheat field.

The wheat growing there hid the waterway from view after its leftward curve.

If she was careless, he could use the terrain to ambush her.

He likely intended to make clever use of this. His feet audibly kicked up the water as he turned his body around and...

“Sermon Cannon!!”

He fired a shot at lower hips height. And it was not a rapid shot.

It was a slow ether projectile that was more released than fired.

Fukushima realized the enemy was luring her in.

The speed and position of his shot was all the proof she needed.

Miyoshi Nyuudou had targeted her hips which were essentially her center of gravity while running.

If she was hit or if she blocked it, the blow to her center of gravity would bring her to a stop.

And it was slow.

A faster shot would have more force behind it, but then the bullet would reach her sooner.

Since he was trying to buy enough time to escape, it was better for him if the bullet took its time reaching her.

And the slower bullet allowed for more accurate aiming. So dodging it was her only option.

However, the direction in which she dodged was the problem. There was water below her, so crouching would slow her down.

If she jumped above it, she would expose her entire body to projectiles. Even with Headfirst Fall, she could not change direction while in the air with no footing.

So it had to be left or right.

But dodging to the left would be dangerous.

The curve up ahead was to the left. If she dodged left, she would be hugging the inside of the corner, but the higher ground and wheat on the left would be in the way. As soon as she entered the corner without being able to see ahead, he could hit her with a counterattack.

Right would be safer. However...

...That would delay me around the left corner!

That would mean widening the gap between her and the enemy.

Fukushima sensed Miyoshi Nyuudou's calm. He had fired one shot as if placing it in the air behind him, but that had given him several different advantages. He had likely been trained for this. Meanwhile...

...If only I had Ichinotani...!"

Then she could have absorbed his attack and continued forward without losing any speed.

The enemy shot approached.

She had to make a decision. So...

"Headfirst Fall...!"

She accelerated.

Seikai grabbed water in his hand.

He scooped it up in his large palm. He held it up so some shadows fell through it and the scene behind him was reflected in the water's surface that floated like a bubble between his fingers.

The wide angle of the reflection showed him a wide area behind him.

He saw something odd in the center of that makeshift mirror.

Fukushima disappeared in an instant.

...A girl's form vanishing in a river awash with summer sunlight...!

He viewed it poetically thanks to his usual habits, but he did not slow his running legs.

The enemy had not actually disappeared.

He indeed saw a movement in the water mirror he checked in a hurry.

It was down below.

Due to the curve of the bubble-shaped water mirror, it was hard to follow movement toward the bottom.

On top of that, Fukushima had taken an unexpected action.

She had leaned over to duck below the Sermon Cannon shot he had fired.

In Seikai's view, ducking below it had been the 2nd best answer.

The best had been to dodge to the right and take the outer corner. Even if she was delayed by that, she would be safe and she could make up for the delay later.

She could not dodge to the left or above because that would expose her to danger.

Below had been the second best option, but...

...Ducking down reduces her speed!

However, the enemy had not ducked down. She had leaned to the side as if collapsing into the water. And...

"She accelerated!?"

She had launched her leaning body forward to maintain her speed.

...I see!

This enemy's acceleration spell did not strengthen her body. It accelerated her from her footing to the direction her feet took her.

She was not running; she was falling.

So what mattered was the indicated direction, not her stance. She could fall headfirst or back-first.

And the enemy made her leap. Her forward "fall" took her below the bullet and, just as she finished passing below it, she righted her body and accelerated herself forward.

There was no hesitation in any stage of her triple fall.

"Impressive!"

Seikai swung his left arm. By twisting his arm, he altered the connections of the tattooed emblem to reload. The bullets seemed to wrap around his left arm and moved from there to his body like large rosary beads. Then he slammed them into the firing spell on his right hand.

“Sermon Cannon Machinegun!”

He fired them in quick succession.

The glowing bullets punched into the waterway’s wall.

The fist-sized shots were fast and fired in rapid succession.

Their firing sounded more like blowing wind than a roar and it was joined by the loud noise of reloading.

In the lead, Seikai ran while facing backwards and kicked up the water.

In pursuit, Fukushima ran while leaning forward and kicked up the water.

Seikai was the first to make his way around the left corner.

He hugged the inside of the corner to make the most of his lead.

And while the waterway’s wall provided cover, he fired ether bullets so they would pass through the other side. And he sprayed them up to down.

For Fukushima, this created a horizontally-sweeping barrage that covered the inside of the corner to the outside of the corner.

“How about that!?”

Seikai shouted that while falling back and that was when Fukushima made her approach.

She took a center route. It was the same route as the one on which she had ducked below the previous shot.

She had not changed her route in response to the random vertical spray of bullets from Seikai. She simply ran, and...

“...!”

She removed her jacket. A moment later, she grabbed the ends of the sleeves, scooped up water like the jacket was a basket, and swung it in front of her.

“...Take this!!”

She released her jacket toward the barrage cutting across at just below chest height.

The water had not had time to soak in, but the jacket struck the barrage with the weight of the water it surrounded.

Even if it was not officially meant for combat, student equipment was given defensive abilities and divine protections. That and the weight of the water was consumed by the enemy bullets.

Of course, the destructive ether bullets would not be stopped by something like that.

A few shots hit it, tore through the water and jacket material, and pierced through.

This was not completely bulletproof.

But the bullets that hit the jacket and water were slowed just a tad. And Fukushima took aim for the gap that created.

“Headfirst Fall...!”

She used her acceleration to throw herself sideways through the air.

She led with her right shoulder, twisted her body, and shifted into a Fosbury Flop.

She kicked off the water’s surface and moved quickly enough that the water only splashed up after the fact.

But not even that was enough. She had launched herself face-up in the air, but the later bullets were going to reach her.

That was why she turned herself around.

She began a midair spin to shift from face-up to face-down. She pointed her belly down and moved her right leg to kick at the water’s surface.

“———”

Her toes breached the water’s surface and reached the stones below.

She had her footing. And just then...

“...!”

She used her acceleration not to pass through the barrage but to pull herself

out of it.

Even so, a few of the bullets still had the speed and trajectory needed to reach her. Because she had twisted her body starting from the feet, her face was furthest away and it had not quite left the barrage.

But she had seen them. And she could instantly grasp the trajectories of just a few.

So she could dodge them.

She cleared the barrage using her twirling and accelerating body along with physical strength centered on her head.

A few strands of hair were taken by the barrage of ether bullets.

But that was all.

She had cleared it. The next acceleration was already entering her body.

Behind her, the abandoned jacket and water belatedly burst.

That spray could not keep up with Fukushima as she moved forward.

She fell forward.

Seikai watched the enemy's movements.

She was catching up. The enemy approached with enough speed to do that.

Seikai thought while moving at a speed so great that the kicked-up water looked slow.

...In the summer sun, I am splashing water in a stream while playing a game of tag with a girl.

He instinctually arranged the scene into poetic terms, but he really did wish he lived in a world like that.

Needless to say, reality was cruel. Reality was nothing like a poem, so he was instead being pursued by an accelerating girl who blasted water explosively into the air.

That was a problem.

The enemy's charge would not stop. She had done an incredible job of forcing her way through his barrage.

He was impressed how she had combined her jacket and the water to escape that tight spot. However...

...Why!? Why would you remove your jacket while behind cover!?

An athletic girl had removed her jacket in a stream below the summer sun.

Such a wonderful scene. So he wished he could have seen it.

“Unacceptable!!”

Seikai scattered gunfire. He fired close-range at the enemy who was rounding the corner. He spread his three demonic fingers and fired the ether bullets along them.

“Take this!”

He launched the 3-way ether bullets.

Fukushima saw the enemy's 3-way scattershot. And she shifted her position.

She chose to dodge Miyoshi Nyuudou's attack.

The Sermon Cannon was an ether cannon attack based on the massive Internal Blessings of his species and released with a spell.

He normally launched the ether bullets as if pushing them with his right palm.

It was a large palm and looking at it told you the angle at which he would fire.

But the palm was pointed downward when he fired this scattershot along his fingers.

If fired in the direction of his palm, it should have flown downward. But that was not what these bullets did.

They followed his fingers and were pushed out from the tips.

In that case, thought Fukushima.

...The enemy's scattershot must be controlled by the spreading of his three fingers!

When targeting someone using his fingertips, it was difficult to intentionally “divert” the shots.

Miyoshi Nyuudou had the middle of his three fingers aimed at her.

So Fukushima leaped into the gap between his middle and outer finger.

“Headfirst Fall!”

She made it.

But Miyoshi Nyuudou reacted by swinging his right arm as he fell back.

He added a winding motion to the bullets.

The rapid-fire sermon bullets formed a horizontal wave and drew something like a whip with their trajectories. They flew past Fukushima, collided with the waterway’s wall or the water’s surface, and filled the air with clumps of dirt and spraying water.

But Fukushima immediately responded to the motion of the enemy’s bullets.

She followed suit.

...I can do this!

The bullets had speed and density, but they came in a wide 3-way spread. This was much easier to dodge than a blade or spear tip aimed at her.

Before this, she had fought opponents whose every attack was meant to be lethal.

Compared to that...

“———!”

She crouched low and jumped forward.

Just then, two things happened before her eyes.

First, Miyoshi Nyuudou leaped backwards.

Second, he closed his fingers.

He greatly compressed the density of the barrage and fired all three shots toward her face while she stayed low.

The distance between them had not shrunk. He had matched his jump to hers.

...He predicted my action!?

She wondered how but found no answer. She simply dodged the barrage.

“Oh...!”

She lowered her body and plunged her head into the water.

She let her stance collapse as much as possible to dodge the bullets.

Her head, shoulders, and chest struck the water and bathed in the scent of algae.

But she had dodged them.

The sweeping air passed overhead. Or rather, over-hips since that was the last part of her to drop down. That was proof that the enemy bullets had passed her by.

She had made it through.

But she was in a dangerous position now.

Plunging to the bottom of the river while accelerating would only lead to self-destruction.

So she first thrust her hands forward below the water. She grasped the bottom of the river as if trying to plunge her hand into the stones there.

At the same time, she slammed her forehead against the riverbed.

Water splashed up as her forehead broke through the water and collided with the stones at the bottom.

But that provided three points of support: her hands and her forehead.

It was a lot like the preparation for a handstand, but that would only make her a target.

She needed to force her hips to the left, spread her legs, and...

...Spin them to the side...!

A handstand would have swung her legs straight up, but she swung them

around to the left instead.

With a forceful twisting of her arms, she took a face-up position while twirling around.

Her skyward vision saw the enemy.

He was aiming his three fingers at her while falling back.

He continued to fire and she was still being pursued by his winding bullets.

So she removed her arms. She released her hold on the riverbed and used her legs to launch herself.

Her left-swung legs pulled her body over.

Her hands and head left the riverbed.

“———”

She now stood on the left wall of the waterway.

She was standing, but her body still had its momentum. So she used that as her initial speed.

“Headfirst Fall...!”

She accelerated and shook the water from her body as spray.

Fukushima chose to run starting with her knee.

After all, she was accelerating from a wall. She first had to right her horizontal body.

But landing vertically in the waterway would create a dangerous time lag as she stood back up.

So she fell knee-first. She was nearly horizontal and she sent her knee into the water.

“...!”

At the last second, she kicked her toes into the water.

When her lower leg hit the riverbed, it could provide acceleration.

So that was what she did.

She began a forced falling acceleration while in something resembling a crouch.

She released it while positioned low and nearly horizontal to the water's surface.

"...Oh!"

She pulled her opposite knee close to her chest to make the next stride.

With each step, she accelerated.

And as she moved forward, she lifted her hips.

To run along the river, she slammed each step backwards and accelerated.

She lifted her hips, fixed them there, and did not raise her upper body.

If her body shook from the force of stepping on the riverbed, she would lose the force needed for her run. If she was to build up her speed, she had to keep her hips high and swing her upper body to match the rhythm of her legs.

...Here I go!

The enemy had predicted her previous action.

So this time, she included a motion that crisscrossed her legs as she ran in an arc. And...

"————"

Fukushima grabbed a handy stone from the riverbed and threw it.

She threw it outside the path of the shots that Miyoshi Nyuudou fired while swinging his arm around. It flew in a high arc.

She had thrown it so it would hit before she arrived. And with this timing...

...It will obscure his view!

In the end, Miyoshi Nyuudou moved to avoid having the falling stone obscure his view.

"..."

The enemy took a large step back.

From Fukushima's perspective, he somewhat increased the distance between them. That step was added to the shrinking distance between them, so they were about a step and a half apart now.

But she had made him jump back.

It was now her turn to match his timing.

She made a crouching jump that matched the position and timing of his landing.

She would be aligned with the center of his chest when he landed.

"Headfirst Fall...!"

She spun around backwards in midair.

She launched a spinning axe kick that carried the acceleration of Headfirst Fall.

Her falling acceleration gave it the same force as landing from a great height. She supported herself with her left leg which scraped and slid along the riverbed.

She was sending her full bodyweight toward the enemy.

Even if the attack was not as effective as hoped, turning her back protected the front of her body and she could use the rebound of the kick to jump the other way and put some distance between them.

And even if the enemy stopped his three-finger rapid-fire and instead fired from his palm...

...His palm is pointed downwards!

That was why she had not jumped in from below despite her crouching stance.

If she was below, he could intercept her from his palm.

But by staying low to the ground, the enemy was forced to continually attack downwards. That meant he could not raise his hand.

That allowed Fukushima to make this axe kick with any possible counterattack suppressed.

...Also...

Fukushima thought, *Given our distance from the Azuchi, I have to settle this here.*

So she made her attack. She leaped to the inside of the right arm he swung around.

“Seiyah...!!”

She launched her accelerated right heel.

In that instant, she heard a voice. It was Miyoshi Nyuudou’s.

“You leave me no choice.”

Fukushima saw Seikai take a certain action after those words.

He slightly spread his three fingers once more.

It was a small movement, but it was enough for the ether bullets to stop traveling down his fingers.

The new ether bullet moved to his downward-facing palm.

It was loaded into the center of his right hand, but he would have a hard time sending it toward her. She was already moving past his hand as she launched a backwards axe kick.

His counterattack would not arrive in time. The palm blast was meaningless, but he released it regardless.

He clenched his hand.

His large palm and three fingers squeezed the ether power while his wrist turned.

A moment later, the ether bullet exploded in his hand.

With a loud noise, cracks ran through his solid hand and the force opened his three fingers once more.

“Oops.”

Fukushima saw the recoil launch his hand forcefully upwards.

But moving upwards brought his fingers to a certain location: “Straight ahead.”

He had turned his wrist because he had predicted this.

He had used the recoil of the misfire to rapidly pull his right hand upwards. He had accepted damage for this movement.

“Here goes.”

Fukushima’s axe kick dropped down on Seikai’s hand.

The next ether bullet would be loaded in his right hand at almost the same moment that her heel would strike that same hand.

...Am I going to hit!?

If she did, that bullet would misfire too.

As a demonic long-lived, Seikai had natural armor, but the previous misfire had still damaged his hand. If a human like Fukushima was exposed to that, it could easily take off her foot.

She made up her mind in a split second.

While spinning her body, she twisted the leg supporting her. She turned her toes in the opposite direction of her movement.

“Headfirst Fall!”

Seikai saw the ether bullet fly out of his raised right hand and into the sky.

And Fukushima had been launched into the air.

She whipped up the wind as she flew to a height of about 7 meters, but it was more of an explosion than a jump that had launched her.

She had not been hit. Her acceleration spell had malfunctioned.

She had not just crashed into a wall of speed. The next burst of acceleration had reached her body in a broken form and sent her in an uncontrollable

direction.

It was a lot like receiving a physical blow.

She was launched without any consideration for how she would land, her entire body was doubled over, and she was twisted to the left.

At this rate, she would fall into the wheat field to the right without her speed dropping much at all.

The effects of the malfunctioning acceleration spell must have remained with her as she flew in a large arc, but all she did was stab into the waves of wheat.

It was over.

The wheat field groaned and the wind swayed back, but there was no sign of the enemy moving within the wheat.

...Should I say that I won?

Seikai looked to his right hand.

The raised palm had large lacerations in it.

Meanwhile, his opponent would have taken damage from the speed crashing into her, but her fall had been cushioned by the wheat.

“I doubt she received any lasting injuries.”

He compared their injuries and compared that to the result of the battle.

...Now, then.

He clenched and lowered his hand as it began dripping blood.

He heard a voice in the distance.

“Fukushima-sama...!”

It was Katou Kiyomasa.

The height of her voice suggested she was running down a path between sections of the wheat field.

A blonde girl was running through the summer sun in search of her friend who had collapsed into the wheat field.

“...A splendid scene to imagine.”

He wanted to see it for himself, but that would put his life at risk. He had confirmed the state of the Azuchi, so withdrawing was most important now.

“I now have quite an odd story to tell. ...A fight with the Ten Spears.”

Now, then.

“How will our Great Teacher and the others view this result and what will it tell them of the future?”

Chapter 27: Silver Wolf at a New Home

第二十七章

『世話先の銀狼』



い
犬ではありませんのよっ
配点 (振られる尻尾)

/

I am not a dog

Point Allocation (Wagging Tail)

Asama breathed a deep sigh as she walked.

She was on the way from the Asama Shrine to the Main Blue Thunder.

The sun was just beginning to move lower in the sky. The sign frame that Hanami held up said it was 2:30 PM.

The study camp had already been dismissed on Okutama's bow deck, so everyone was beginning their next action.

Masazumi and the others had gone to the Student Council Room to prepare for the next meeting and the Mouri and Houjou people had gone to their diplomatic buildings. Asama had changed the Mouri clan's main shrine setting as asked. She had expected it to be a lot of work, but...

...It went surprisingly smoothly...

Mouri's main shrine had been the Suga Shrine. That was an old shrine that was connected to Susanoo's slaying of Yamata. The shrine did not have a wide reach, but it had long produced its own unique brand of powerful combat spells.

Asama viewed it as a shrine that took full advantage of its strengths as an individual.

Mouri's main shrine rights had been temporarily transferred from that Suga Shrine to a Kantou shrine.

Asama had wondered what shrine that would be and now she had her answer: "Atsugi's Mishima Shrine...?"

Atsugi's Mishima Shrine.

That was one branch of the Mishima shrines. It was located at the center of Kantou.

According to Terumoto...

“Mouri was originally known as the Ooe clan and worked for Kamakura. Atsugi’s Mishima was there at the time. Mouri broke off as a branch family and so on, but if we are to use the Mouri name in that land, it would be best to shift our rights to the Mishima Shrine. That should result in the least amount of interference.”

That was true, but it showed real commitment to make the Mouri’s main shrine a branch shrine instead of the primary shrine.

Was that restriction meant to show that they needed Asama’s assistance? However...

...Figuring out this kind of divine work is pretty fun...

It felt a lot like a game when she found unexpected connections or made predictions.

“The Mishima Shrine that Terumoto-san asked for belongs to a conglomerate where the Ooyamazumi Shrine and main Mishima Shrine are above it and one of its gods is closely related to the Asama Shrine’s...”

One of the Mishima gods was Ooyamatsumi, the father of Sakuya who was worshiped by the Asama Shrine.

Ooyamatsumi was a harvest god that covered both the mountains and the sea. There was a story of him sending his daughter Sakuya and her older sister Iwanaga as wives for the heavenly god Ninigi.

In other words, a harvest god had given his power to a descendant of the heavenly gods.

However, Ninigi had taken Sakuya as his wife, but as for Iwanaga who was sent with her...

...She was a little too extreme for him, so he chose to not take her as a wife.

The official explanation had been that she was ugly, but for the history recreation...

“Beauty standards are different in every age, right?”

Once someone mentioned that, the busty and flat chest factions had gotten into a bare-handed fistfight, the plump and slender factions had started using joint locks on each other, and even the longhair, ponytail, blonde hair, and black hair factions had rolled up their sleeves to join the brawl.

They had ultimately settled on a gray zone solution of “nominating someone who matched the sensibilities of that age”, but Ooyamatsumi had been enraged when Iwanaga was sent back and he had said the following to Ninigi: “Iwanaga was the daughter in charge of lifespan, so now your descendants will have a set lifespan. End of story!”

That had led to a response heard over and over in the Age of the Gods: “You didn’t tell me that!!”

However, researchers suspected that Sakuya, who had something of a fiery personality, would never have allowed her children to have a set lifespan. So there was a basic consensus on what would have happened next: “That had to have ended badly.”

“That would have ended very badly.”

“Her father would not have escaped unharmed.”

And the Iwanaga incident created an odd trend in the ancient Divine States: “The more extreme your fetishes, the longer your lifespan.”

That was what had led to the blossoming of the genre fetishes supported by Shinto.

That somewhat troublesome father god was worshiped at Mishima, but...

...Sakuya set fire to the maternity room, so her husband Ninigi must have had a rough time...

This time, the daughter god’s shrine had set things up for the source of that troublesome family.

But Mouri’s original main shrine, the Suga Shrine, was also very interesting to Asama.

“Ooyamatsumi is the grandfather of Kushinada, wife of Susanoo.”

Kushinada’s parents were not Sakuya and Ninigi, so Sakuya would be their

aunt.

...Neshinbara-kun would probably like this kind of story...

In fact, there was no probably about it.

However, Asama thought Mouri's shrine history followed an interesting genealogy.

In Kantou, they had used the Mishima Shrine that worshiped Ooyamatsumi, but they had later come to use the Suga Shrine that worshipped Susanoo, grandson-in-law of Ooyamatsumi.

It seemed like the generations of gods and humans had matched up by pure coincidence, but...

"They probably followed the best possible course."

She felt some awe because she was the Asama Shrine Representative.

Meanwhile, the processing had gone surprisingly well.

Mouri had been registered to the Mishima Shrine long ago, so that shrine had only needed to dig up the old records.

The registration settings were from about 400 years ago, but the Kamakura Shogunate had been primarily made up of the long-lived. Whether or not some of that blood was included in the Mouri family tree was more of a Neshinbara topic.

To start with, Asama sent a request to rewrite Mouri's original local shrine registration with the Mishima Shrine to make that their main shrine.

Then she worked out what shrines the Mouri clan had been registered with between Mishima and Suga when they moved from Sagami to Aki.

"...Mouri split off in Echigo too, didn't they?"

The original Ooe clan came from the Kyoto area and the group that joined Kamakura was special.

The Kamakura Mouri clan had spread to Echigo, Aki, and Choushuu. After that, the main group in Aki had created what was now known as the Mouri clan.

So Asama confirmed the historical main shrines of each Mouri branch. She

made sure none of their main shrine settings were still active.

“Okay, that looks fine.”

After making sure she had not entered anything incorrectly, she changed the Suga Shrine registration to a secondary shrine setting. She sent a registration request to IZUMO and only a few seconds later...

<Main Shrine Setting: Mouri Clan: Suga Main Shrine → Mishima Atsugi Branch Shrine: Intermediary – Asama Main Shrine: Setup Complete: Asama-sama has earned 5000 IZUMO Points> ...Oh, maybe I should buy a black disk with those points...

Meanwhile, the Mishima settings were automatically transferred over and rewritten.

Hanami had likely automatically arranged a few parts of that.

But that mostly ended it. The interference settings and restrictions release would have to wait until after IZUMO sent the main shrine data to Mouri.

Terumoto would likely tell Asama what she wanted and needed done. A third party could not interfere until they knew that. So...

“I can help out with some other things...”

Asama breathed in and faced forward.

She was on the familiar path to the Main Blue Thunder.

...We’re inviting Mouri and Houjou here for a strategy meeting this evening, aren’t we?

They had to decide on the rules for the duels.

They could not exactly use the Student Council Room, so they had decided to use the Main Blue Thunder instead. However...

“Hmm...”

Asama suddenly came to a stop.

She looked down at what she held in her right hand.

Her right fingers grasped a wicker bag, which contained...

“...A sleepover set.”

She had come to a stop because she was unsure if she should really be bringing that, but then...

“Huh? Asama-san, why are you just standing there!?”

Adele saw Asama just about jump off her feet.

She did not actually leave the ground, but her entire body shook as if stretching upwards.

...Is there anything Asama-san can't do...?

And she always goes all out with her shtick, thought Adele as Asama slowly turned around.

Adele predicted Asama would be mad or would make some kind of *tsukkomi*, so she put together a response in her mind. However...

“Ahh...”

Asama sighed when she looked back over her shoulder and saw Adele.

It was a breath of both relief and relaxation. She finally fixed her summer uniform's collar and spoke.

“Don't scare me like that, Adele.”

“Oh, um, uh.”

Adele had not predicted this reaction.

If anything, it was timid.

...U-umm?

Adele could not figure out why Asama would be acting this way. However...

“Sorry. D-did I catch you at a bad time?”

“Eh? No, not really. ...Why would it be a bad time?”

...I was asking because I don't know!

But once Asama brought her breathing under control, she looked the same as

ever.

And...

“Adele, are you on the way to the Main Blue Thunder too?”

“Judge. I bet I’ll get some snacks if I get there early!”

“...If you’re starving, I could give you a piece of candy.”

“I’ll take it!”

Asama gave her a brown sugar candy wrapped in bamboo leaf, so she immediately ate it.

“It’s so sweet! Hopefully it will last until dinner.”

“I really don’t think that’s possible. ...Huh?”

Asama looked to the Main Blue Thunder on their right.

Adele looked in the same direction, although Asama’s breasts were in the way. Asama then grabbed her shoulders.

“—————”

She wordlessly pulled her back below the eaves of a store.

They were at a clothing store three buildings away from the Main Blue Thunder. They were now shaded from the summer sun, but...

“Um, Asama-san?”

“Oh, yes. Just a moment.”

Wondering what this was about, Adele looked out from behind Asama and toward the Blue Thunder.

She saw someone standing in front of it.

They held a suitcase in front of the entrance.

“The 5th Special Duty Officer?”

Mitotsudaira sweated in the sun.

...I actually came...!

No, there was nothing weird about coming here. They were having a meeting here.

And her mansion had been destroyed in the battle with Sanada's Terrestrial Dragon. Torahide's claws had flown over, broken through the mansion's roof, and destroyed the interior, but now that she thought about it...

"...Those weren't the ones I was swinging around, were they?"

If she had done this to herself, the insurance would not pay out, so she wanted to avoid that.

Whatever the case, she no longer had a house. She had brought a set of equipment to the Student Council Room, but she could not just leave it there.

And if they finished their plans with Mouri today, her mother and father would arrive. And they were clearly planning to spend the night.

As their daughter, it was her duty to deal with any problems that led to. She wondered how long she would have to prostrate herself to make up for it if the Main Blue Thunder was destroyed. *An amateur prostration might not be enough.*

But she was concerned about something else as well.

...What will happen to me if I start living here?

Her mother had said Mouri and Hexagone Française had no intention of paying to reconstruct her mansion, so she would have to use her savings, earnings, and meager insurance payout. But...

"That isn't nearly enough for a mansion in the surface city..."

She had needed to move before due to the situation on the Musashi, but that had been relatively cheap because it had only been shifting the existing mansion from one place to another. Constructing something from the ground up was another matter entirely.

She wanted a home.

That was her honest desire, but if she paid rent, she would have less money to pay for reconstruction.

...The fastest method would be to sell my company...

But she was provisionally second in line to ruling the Far East. Nobles, merchants, and politicians would sometimes show signs of trying to build connections with her and that could feel troublesome.

She knew who her king was, so she preferred to ignore those extra matters, but selling her company could create such a connection.

So, she decided in her heart. I will live in this building before me to show that those connections will not work with me.

However...

...It isn't right to use the relationship with my king to eliminate a personal annoyance of mine.

More and more thoughts filled her mind.

She had brought some sleepover luggage here, but could she really step through that door?

She knew her king would be there, but what would he think when he saw her luggage?

“...That's right.”

She felt like there would be no saving her if she saw a look of surprise on his face.

But she felt like it would all work out if he would accept her.

She felt like she could leave everything with him if he said he was glad she had come.

So what would happen?

She kept thinking, but before any of that, she wondered if her king would eventually notice that she was waiting here.

Even if she had her king's support, a knight was not to set foot inside her king's home.

She wanted her king to notice she was here. But at the same time...

...It isn't right for a knight to make her king come out and greet her either.

So she would not call for her king.

She was standing perfectly still in front of the house and its door. What would people think she looked like here?

"I think I know."

The thought suddenly hit her.

...A guard dog?

...N-no!?

A dangerous word had entered her mind.

No. That is not what I look like.

I mean, a guard dog is watching out for people arriving, so it would have its back to the door.

She was facing the door, so she was not playing a guard dog's role.

Yes, that's right, thought Mitotsudaira. This is certainly nothing like a dog sitting at the entrance waiting to be fed.

Then another thought hit her.

...This is the same as a dog waiting for its master!

What was she supposed to do about that?

Yes. She could not face the door and she could not face away from the door either.

"I just have to face sideways!"

Asama saw Mitotsudaira fidget for a while and finally turn to face away from them.

Why was unclear.

Adele tilted her head while watching along with Asama.

“Is that what I think it is...?”

“Adele, do you understand Mito’s bizarre behavior?”

“Well...it looks a lot like how a well-behaved dog will sit to the side of the entrance so it doesn’t get in its owner’s way. I guess that does suit the 5th Special Duty Officer pretty well.”

“No, um, that can’t be it. Because, uh, Mito isn’t a dog.”

But it was true Asama had thought “oh, she’s wagging her tail” earlier.

However, Adele did make some sense.

Mitotsudaira was waiting.

One important factor of her relationship with him was gaining her king’s approval.

A knight could not beg her king for things, so the king had to accept the knight as a matter of course. That was one type of ideal relationship.

Was the silver wolf using this to seek that ideal?

Yet if anyone visited, it would be obvious she was waiting.

But as Asama watched the girl change position again as she waited in front of the door...

...That is a lot like Mito...

She was bold in her actions, but that boldness was always directed outwards. Her one weakness was on the inside.

If her king no longer needed her, she would lose any direction for that boldness.

She would lose all meaning and strength. She would simply lose her destination.

Instead of a knight headed somewhere, she would become an unmoving knight who protects her current location. To Mitotsudaira, that would mean no longer being her king’s knight. She would only be a knight of Musashi who acts only when it would protect Musashi.

That was of course a valid course for her life. That was the original definition of a knight of Musashi.

But she had wanted a different path and it had been given to her.

So she waited.

She waited for her king to open the door either coincidentally or intentionally.

She had to understand that this was like a game. And once she was satisfied with her game, she would probably open the door herself. However...

“...Yes.”

“Eh?”

Adele looked over and Asama realized she was blushing herself.

“No, um...”

How was she supposed to explain this?

As she watched Mitotsudaira in profile, she saw the silver wolf tensing her shoulders a bit and occasionally taking deep breaths to calm herself.

“...She looks like she’s having fun.”

Asama started to feel jealous, so she corrected her thoughts.

She reminded herself that she would probably act just like that if she was the one standing in front of that door.

Mitotsudaira patiently waited.

She was good at waiting. She had waited years before her king started forward.

The short time spent standing here was nothing compared to the agonizingly long wait to see if her king would move or not.

“Oh, you’re here, you’re here.”

The door suddenly opened.

The nudist was there.

Right in front of her.

Eh? thought Mitotsudaira while unable to react to the sudden occurrence. But before she could take another breath, the nudist descended the Main Blue Thunder's step and took her luggage.

If she did not let go of the luggage, he would end up taking her hand and pulling on it. That was when she came back to her senses.

"...Um, my king?"

"Hey, were you waiting long? I thought you'd probably be showing up about now."

Hearing that made her heart skip a beat because she thought he might have seen her. However...

"I knew you'd probably arrive first, so I thought I'd open the door so you could come right in."

"M-me? First?"

"Who would be first but you, Nate?"

"Oh, uh, well..."

As she tried to figure out how to answer that, he pulled on her hand.

They stepped up into the entrance and he guided her inside. For a few hesitant steps, she was unsure if she should let him pull her or if she should actively follow him.

She ultimately decided to "not fight it".

"...Ah."

Once inside, she realized something.

There was no one there.

She was first.

Kimi would of course be in the back, but there was no one else.

This was best for a knight who was meant to stand by her king's side.

And a thought occurred to her.

...I'm glad no one else arrived while I was waiting.

If someone else had gone in before her, she would not have been able to feel this emotion.

This was nothing more than being the first to arrive, but she was glad she had come so early despite her hesitation.

...Yes.

She breathed a sigh of relief and satisfaction and her king gestured toward the bottom of the shoe rack.

“Come on in, come on in. Also...”

He smiled and looked at what she held.

And he asked a question.

“You’ll be staying here now, right?”

Mitotsudaira tried to think about what he meant.

She tried to think about how this would look, what her mother would say, and what her friends would say, but...

“...Judge.”

She managed to say it, albeit quietly. And then...

“Judge...!”

She repeated herself. Meanwhile, she felt heat gathering in her cheeks and in her entire body. She was not confident she could restrain herself once that heat gathered beyond its limit.

...That's right.

There was something she had to say here.

“I look forward to living with you, my king.”

She said it.

She hoped he felt the same way.

And she hoped her king had not just been talking about tonight or until she could rebuild her mansion.

Then her king reacted.

“Ah.”

“...Ah? What does that mean?”

“Well, um, Nate?”

“Y-yes, what is it?”

“Umm,” said the nudist while raising his hands toward her.

It was clearly a “wait a second” gesture. However...

...Wait. Don't tell me...

Had she been mistaken, so he had to correct her?

She felt the heat in her body begin to fade.

That was exactly when he asked his question.

“This is a permanent thing, right?”

Kimi flipped through a sign frame while lying on her bed.

They would have a lot of visitors today. Enough that her brother would need help with the cooking. She knew she could get help from herself, Asama, and her mother at the Blue Thunder.

...Horizon's cooking would be good for some laughs, but is that what we want today?

They would all need to work hard regardless, but coming up with a menu in advance was important. So she thought about what they had stocked in their home's storeroom and ice room as well as what they could get sent over from the Blue Thunder.

“...Oh?”

She knew her brother and his knight were speaking in the restaurant area.

But she heard something hard hit the floor in there.

The knight had likely dropped her luggage.

She knew what had happened. The wolf would have sunk down to the floor.

She had spoken with Kimi's brother and he had said something she did not expect. Kimi knew that had to be the situation.

...How delightful.

She and her brother were no longer alone. Horizon was there too, but...

...As someone who stands on the borderline, they are "alone".

Kimi was in a complicated position where she was turned a bit toward those two who were "alone together".

"I'm so thankful for that."

She had always been afraid of what would happen if something happened when she only had her brother.

And if something happened to one or the other of them, then there would only be the one left.

But now he had a knight who would share in all that.

He would probably bring in more than just her, but the wolf was the one her brother was the most *aware* of.

The knight had arrived as she was meant to and they had confirmed their relationship with each other.

...A wolf would probably be so happy she pissed herself...

What was she supposed to say about a silver wolf that sank to the floor while wetting herself?

Kimi made sure there was some meat on the menu while smiling and rolling in her bed. She felt amusement tickling at her heart.

"They say a happy life can pack on the pounds, but is it supposed to take your legs out from under you?"

Mitotsudaira thought about standing up.

...U-umm.

She had to stand up.

Besides, she did not even know why she had sunk down to the floor.

If she had her king's trust and this was what he wanted, then she only had to hold her head high and answer him.

She could not stand up.

More than her hips being weak, it was her knees that could not support any weight.

She could not believe it.

But her king simply held his palm out toward her.

"Wait just a second, okay?"

"...Eh?"

The nudist ran to the kitchen. For no apparent reason, he shook his hips twice in the entrance, but that was probably a ritual of his.

And her king soon came back.

He held a long knife and he stood in front of her with it.

"Umm, Nate Mitotsudaira."

"Your God Mosaic is right in front of me, so I'm a little worried about this situation."

"Just bear with it for a moment. Um, Nate."

"Y-yes?"

He had told her to bear with it, so there had to be some meaning to this.

So she waited and her king suddenly continued.

"You listening?"

"Yes."

"Nate, I hereby reserve you to be my knight once I become a king."

Umm.

“To do it right, I’m supposed to hit you on the head with the blade, right?”

“I would die!”

Why could she not imagine herself dodging her king’s attack?

But she knew what he was doing.

“Are you knighting me?”

“This is the best time, right?”

“W-well,” hesitated Mitotsudaira. “Will you keep this a secret?”

“Yeah, we’ll just do it like this for now. I briefly considered doing it using the topknot, but...hey, don’t give me that look! Anyway...we can always do it properly if there’s a good chance later on.”

But...

“Since you’re coming to live here, I thought this was the time for now.”

After that, he tapped her shoulder with the flat of the blade.

“Keep helping me out, okay?”

Hearing that, she took in a breath and...

“Judge.” Mitotsudaira bowed her head. “My body and soul are yours to command. And I offer my services to you.”

The ceremony was no more than words. They were not actually binding a contract or exchanging divine protections.

But her king said, “I’m supposed to rub perfumed oil on your forehead, right?”

“That is one method.”

“...I guess it wouldn’t be right to use the oil from the bacon I was cooking earlier, would it?”

“I-I am not that much of a meat lover!”

“In that case,” he said while crouching down.

...Eh?

He parted her bangs and then she felt something warm and damp on her forehead.

He had pressed his lips against her and then licked her.

He had clearly tasted her.

“There.”

“...M-my king?”

The mix of suddenness and surprise led Mitotsudaira to quickly raise her head. Her king sat in front of her and rubbed her head.

“You prefer it this way, right?”

“Well, it does seem appropriate...but why so suddenly?”

“Judge. Nate Maman licked my forehead when I was sleeping in her bed before, so I figured that was how Loup-Garous did things.”

...Even he knows you licked him, mother!!

But given what happened here, way to go, mother!!

You never know what consequences something will have, noted Mitotsudaira as the nudist seemed to grab her head to more roughly rub it.

“Umm.”

He stood up and hurried back to the kitchen to put away the knife.

In the short time that his back was turned, Mitotsudaira pressed her right middle finger’s nail against her forehead.

That was where he had tasted her. She pressed the silver nail there to confirm the location.

“————”

Then she brought the nail between her lips.

She wrapped her tongue around it and sent the contents of her mouth to her throat as if swallowing.

...Nn.

She sensed her king's scent.

She might forget this scent, but she wanted to make sure she would not forget what happened here.

...We have shared secrets, but this secret is mine alone.

She realized her king would have learned her flavor as well, so this made them even. After using that reasoning to convince herself, she stood up.

She placed her dropped luggage in a corner of the restaurant area.

"My king."

"Yeah?" he said while walking back in.

"May I go stand watch outside for a bit? ...The smell of bacon in here is making my stomach growl."

Chapter 28: Emotional Girl Within the Construction

第二十八章

『工事途中の感情娘』



どーですかねー
大丈夫ですかねー
おおおお
配点 (お、おちつ、こ)

How's this going?

Is she okay?

Ohhhhhhh

Point Allocation (L-let's calm...down)

Mitotsudaira entered the Main Blue Thunder and did not come back out.

Asama intently watched that fact.

...Umm.

That meant Mitotsudaira had entered the Aoi home.

There was nothing odd about that. After all, they were holding a meeting in the Main Blue Thunder and Mouri and Houjou's representatives would be in attendance.

So there was nothing odd about an officer like Mitotsudaira to be there.

But, thought Asama. *Mito lost her mansion and she had that luggage.*

That meant she had *entered* the Aoi home as a knight.

...She's taken that first major step...

First major step toward what?

And was Asama simply shocked, or was she actually jealous? However...

"Huh?"

The door opened and someone stepped out.

It was Mitotsudaira.

...She's leaving?

It can't be, thought Asama as she saw Mitotsudaira without her luggage.

Did she have business somewhere, had she forgotten something, or had her king asked something of her? However, the visible profile of her face showed her eyebrow raised and her lips smiling. There was no sign of negativity there.

But she descended the step and held her nose a bit high.

“Now, then,” she said in a carrying voice. “I’m a little worried about leaving my king in there all alone, but I need to patrol the area.”

With that, she began walking along the road to port.

She was leaving here.

Asama and Adele were left alone again and Adele chose to speak.

“Asama-san.”

“? What is it?”

Adele was smiling at her.

“I forgot something, so can I head back real quick?”

“W-wait a second, Adele! You’re running away, aren’t you!?”

“W-well, it’s just that the 5th Special Duty Officer was clearly being considerate in a certain sense!”

“Now I kind of have to ask: in what sense?”

Asama asked that with a smile and Adele averted her gaze.

And she answered quietly.

“In the sense of knowing when to give up...?”

...Wow, now that’s accurate.

Well, that was probably how it looked to those who were not a part of it themselves.

And that was why Asama felt like she would be selling herself short if she simply went along with it.

...Ah, I’m really a pain in the butt, aren’t I?

If even she saw it that way, it had to be pretty bad for the people looking in from outside.

However...

“Huh?”

Horizon walked up from the port stern.

She carried a basket of bread on her back and held some largish luggage in her hands.

“Vicereine Horizon kind of looks like Musashibou Benkei right now, doesn’t she?”

“She does...”

Horizon walked up to the café’s entrance.

Asama and Adele ducked down.

Adele spoke in a mixture of curiosity and seriousness.

“Is Vicereine Horizon hesitating over a lot of things like the 5th Special Duty Officer was?”

Meanwhile, Horizon casually opened the door and walked in.

It happened right before Asama was about to respond to Adele’s question.

“ ...”

“ ...”

“ ...”

“...That was casual.”

“Yes. ...She didn’t even knock.”

“...I think that plan was a failure.”

“Horizon can be awfully masculine, after all.”

Then the door opened again.

The first thing that came out was a right arm crawling along and holding up the now-empty basket. Asama had a thought as she watched that arm wriggle rapidly to port.

...That is quite the visual...

That was something she never would have seen on the Musashi half a year before. Although that was the normal state of things.

But then Horizon herself came out. And they heard the idiot’s voice from

inside.

“Huh!? Where are you going, Horizon!?”

“To continue my work at the Blue Thunder. I must serve the customers with a memorable afternoon.”

“Eh? So if I go there, you’ll serve me!?”

“Ho ho? So you would be happy if I served you as a job? And for money?”

"Dammmiiiiiiiiiiiiit!! Couldn't you phrase that in a nicer way!?"

“You sound like an entertainer wishing he could get laughs just by climbing up on stage.”

“You’re only getting harsher!!”

"No. If we were ranking this, that one would be a 5."

“Out of how many? Is that high or low?”

“...Which would you prefer?”

After rejecting his question, Horizon continued.

“Besides, you talked big during the study camp about being reliable enough to support two or three girls as soon as we got back, but here I find you all alone frying bacon in the nude. What is that supposed to prove? And what happens if you got hot oil on your dick?”

“Dammit! Dammit! I don’t even know where to start with that one, but Nate already showed up! See, there’s her luggage! Well? Don’t got a comeback for that, do you!?”

“That luggage does not smell like meat, so I can only assume it is an illusion you have created.”

“Every once in a while, even Nate does things without meat.”

“I see.” Horizon gave a thumbs up and entered the café. “As far as your reliability goes, I will accept Mitotsudaira-sama’s willpower and recognize Mitotsudaira-sama’s decisiveness.”

“Huh, huh? What happened to your judgement of me?”

“Oh, dear. What a self-centered boy.”

“Wait! I’ll have you know I’m a laughs-centered entertainer! Got that!?”

The right arm returned and gently shut the door.

...That was incredible...

Adele gave a deep nod while ducking down next to Asama.

“I feel like the truth resides in Vicereine Horizon’s words.”

“...Then the truth must be a very inconvenient thing for life in general.”

But Horizon started walking toward the Blue Thunder, so the two watched her leave.

...Now, then.

Asama sighed in her heart as she tried to figure out what she should do.

Mitotsudaira walked.

She had no destination in mind. Only...

...This is not good.

Her thoughts were directly linked to her body.

Her gait was light and grew to a jog.

“ ... ”

The next thing she knew, she had arrived at Musashino’s atrium park.

She had no intention of descending to the floor below. Besides, the port half of the atrium park had been destroyed during Torahide’s rampage and so it had become a large hole.

From her position, she could see that everything from that half of the park onwards, including the residential district, had been removed down to the third underground floor so it could be repaired.

There were some surviving districts on the port side, but...

...It did a lot of damage.

By standing by the railing overlooking the atrium park, she could tell just how largescale the other night's battle had been.

"It's fortunate the Main Blue Thunder survived..."

She could not say their battle had been a good thing. The scene before her looked more like destruction than anything.

But she did think they had kept the damage to a minimum and they were making an attempt to ensure everything was being improved as it was repaired. Also...

"————"

She placed a hand on her shoulder.

Her summer uniform's shoulder was modeled after a *kariginu*, so her skin showed through.

She could still feel the chill of the blade there and the pressure of the metal as it was pushed against her with surprisingly little restraint.

Then he had "tasted" her.

Both had left their "mark" on her skin. Leaving some kind of mark on her body felt so very important to her, but was that because she was a Glossolalian?

But more than that...

...I am a knight.

She and her king had held a private knighting ceremony.

That was a shared secret.

Mitotsudaira thought, *My king and I have a part of our relationship that only we share.*

Of course, everyone knew that she was his knight and understood what that meant.

But only the two of them knew that it had grown deeper than that.

The battle was about to grow much harder for the king who had set their

path. With that largescale battle approaching, he must have decided this was necessary.

She did not need to announce this as her king's knight. She only needed to hold her head high and live her life as she had before.

It had been the same when she had decided he would be her king.

If that had been the ceremony to make her his knight...

"Hee hee..."

Then this had been the ceremony for her to place herself by her king's side.

They would likely have more of those ceremonies in the future.

...I look forward to it.

She rested her elbows on the railing and placed her hands on her cheeks.

They were hot.

She could tell she was smiling uncontrollably.

And...

"Nn..."

Her body was celebrating. Heat filled it and she felt restless.

Her loosened body felt a bit better when she pressed her knees together and stuck her butt back a bit.

"..."

She took a breath and let her body relax.

...Honestly...

She sighed and sensed a short figure to her left.

It was a basket.

A closer look showed Horizon's right arm was holding up the basket and looking around the area.

It seemed lost. It was only trying to get from Musashino to the Blue Thunder, but there was too much construction at the moment.

After checking to the left and right, the arm seemed to notice her. It faced her with its fingers sticking forward like a snake's head.

"Umm, it's that way."

When Mitotsudaira pointed toward the path to Tama, the right arm nimbly twisted itself around and hurried in that direction.

It looked hesitantly back once, so she waved.

It waved the basket back and then hurried on its way without looking back again.

...I did a good deed.

Part of her thought she could not afford to get used to things like this, but that was her fate if she lived here.

She looked over and saw Horizon on a temporary suspension bridge that crossed the atrium park while it was under construction.

She was likely going to the Blue Thunder.

She must have gone to the Main Blue Thunder after Mitotsudaira had left and she was now on the way back.

"I'm glad his knight did not show up after everyone else..."

Nothing could have been more pathetic, she thought as she saw the right hand catch up to Horizon from behind.

Horizon noticed it and looked back.

"———"

The hand must have told her about Mitotsudaira because she came to a stop and looked Mitotsudaira's way.

She raised her left hand and waved hello.

So Mitotsudaira did the same.

Then Horizon resumed walking and Mitotsudaira sighed again.

...The heat inside me has calmed down some.

Rather than letting it cool, she may have simply grown accustomed to it.

When she remembered what had happened before, she felt the heat of a blush gently tickling her deep in her chest, but it was still a happy thing at that level.

She would allow that feeling to stay inside her forevermore.

“But...”

Her own lupine instincts scared her sometimes.

She was honestly impressed she had not given into her urges when her king had tasted her.

Even now, her body wanted her to do the same thing to her king.

If she had been sitting with her king right now, she might very well have rubbed her cheek against him and then all over his body.

She felt an odd temptation and allowance in her mind that told her there was nothing wrong with doing that.

She had only resisted earlier because her knightly pride had subconsciously kicked in.

It was said chivalry had been developed in the middle ages so fighters would not give into their more savage urges and so they would not do anything disrespectful to their king. She found here just how true that was.

While taking this short break from being a knight, she had grown a little bit wild.

But, she thought.

...My mother must have held back a lot when it comes to my father.

Mitotsudaira only had half Loup-Garou blood, yet it was this bad for her.

Her mother’s predatory urges had to be even stronger, so it had to be a lot worse. Based on the story of what had happened when they were just getting to know each other, she had to be restraining herself quite a lot now.

Of course, it was also frightening how defenseless her father could act.

He would eat meat and spend the night around her mother when she was in a worse state than Mitotsudaira now, so he was either as brave as can be or as

dense as can be. *Or does he actually want to be eaten?*

Also, all of that seemed to have knocked a screw loose in both her parents, but was she only imagining that?

And when she compared her situation to that...

“...Huh?”

She realized something.

...My king is the defenseless type too...!

At the very least, he did not doubt anyone who would kindly protect him. He would acknowledge that they were someone who might eat him, but he would trust that they would not.

That was probably why her mother had not eaten her father or her king. Because doing so would mean betraying the trust of someone she had protected.

The Reine des Garous’s pride would not allow her to betray the trust of someone weaker than her.

That was why she had decided to not eat Mitotsudaira’s father back then. *Although what motivates her now may be a different matter.*

“But then what about me?”

Something else occurred to Mitotsudaira.

...I went there so that I could have him “take responsibility”, didn’t I...?

What did that mean?”

“Umm.”

...Can I eat him...!?

She had to be considerate of a number of things. But if she ignored all that, this situation allowed her to be a predator. After all, that was supposed to be part of “taking responsibility”.

If she used her parents as an analogy, then wasn’t she currently at the point 7 seconds before that 24-day competition began?

Shocked, she shoved her face between the arms resting on the railing.

...This is a bigger step than I thought!

She had thought she was ready for everything when she “entered” her king’s home, but she felt like she kept running across unexpected conditions and situations.

What she did not know was how much of this her king was aware of.

But whether he was aware of it or not...

“I know what my mother would say: ‘That’s what you’re after, isn’t it?’ ”

Mitotsudaira looked down.

With her head lowered between her arms, she could look down into the park below the railing.

Or so she assumed.

What she actually saw was her mother. Past the railing, her mother was dangling down from the railing’s support bar and looking back up at her.

And before Mitotsudaira could react at all...

“Nate, you’re ready to do it, aren’t you!?”

Her mother used just her arms to rapidly climb up the railing support bars.

She climbed to the top of the railing and flew in an arc while Mitotsudaira pulled her head back.

“That’s my daughter!”

She hugged her with all her might.

Suzu thought she heard Mitotsudaira scream.

...H-huh?

It came from Musashino’s construction site, but she seriously doubted anything would happen at a construction site that could make Mitotsudaira scream.

Also, everyone was supposed to be in the Main Blue Thunder right now. The people who had gone to the Student Council Room would be late, but the non-officers and those quicker on their feet should already have been there.

Bell: “Toori-kun...is everyone...there?”

Me: “Oh, Bell-san? Well, Nate and Horizon stopped by before, but they left. So it’s just sis and me.”

Wise Sister: “Heh heh. I’m in bed right now thinking about where to seat everyone, so my foolish brother is taking care of the kitchen. Or in French for our guests, my fool-eesh frère dooz eet all! Wait, foolish brother! When I said ‘eet all’, I didn’t mean you get to eat it all! You’re the cook, so I can’t believe you would even think of doing that!”

Me: “Sis! Sis! That’s way too many difficult setups in a row there!”

Toori-kun can never win with Kimi-chan, thought Suzu.

But something felt odd about this.

Bell: “Why isn’t...everyone...there?”

Hori-ko: “They all hate him... In a gal game, this is where the heroine rejects him in front of the school gate saying, ‘Walking home with you would gather too much attention and fill me with shame. You’re a creep.’ ”

Me: “That last part was from you, wasn’t it!?”

They were always really harsh with each other. However...

Wise Sister: “Let’s see. I think Asama and Adele should be arriving about now, so I wonder what’s keeping them.”

Suzu agreed with that.

They had some other highly mobile classmates like Naito and Naruze, so it would not have been surprising if they got there ahead of everyone else.

...I wonder...why.

With that thought, Suzu arrived at the road to the Main Blue Thunder.

Just then...

“Oh, hey, Suzu-san. Hey.”

She heard Adele’s voice and felt a tug at her summer uniform’s sleeve.

...*Wah.*

Suzu just about shouted out loud when someone tugged at her without advance warning that they were going to touch her. She only managed to restrain herself because of the note of tension in Adele’s voice.

Something had happened.

So she let herself be pulled behind cover.

They were between some water buckets behind a storage shed 5 buildings down from the Main Blue Thunder.

Adele was ducked down low there, so Suzu asked a question.

“Wh-what is...it?”

“Well, um, this is an important moment. ...For Asama-san.”

“Asama...-san?”

When she focused on her ears, she did indeed sense that girl.

Asama stood in front of the Main Blue Thunder.

She was all alone with luggage in hand and she stood motionless in front of the door.

...*Ah.*

Suzu sensed the size and weight of Asama’s luggage.

It was not the size she normally used to bring cooking supplies or studying tools.

She had brought a full change of clothes and other supplies for spending the night.

It felt a lot like she had repacked the luggage she had brought on the study camp.

Suzu nodded at and thought about what that luggage meant.

“I see...”

Knowing Asama, she had not come here today to stay in the Aoi home forever.

She had the Asama Shrine. And Asama herself had not fully made up her mind about herself.

She did not know what to do about the many possibilities before her eyes.

This had happened in the past too.

It had happened in elementary school and in middle school.

She would sometimes hesitate and she would often back off from whatever it was.

And she generally used the same excuses:

...“That isn’t like me” or “I have the Asama Shrine”.

But that had changed somewhat once they reached high school.

She had started to change her viewpoint or way of thinking while remaining who she had always been and she had even started performing in a band. Also...

“Nn...”

Before, she would not have brought this sleepover luggage. When they had had meetings before, she had simply spent the night as she was.

Since she had brought the luggage this time, she had to have given it more thought.

Suzu knew Horizon’s words and his statements over the past few days had to have “shaken up” a lot of things inside Asama.

...That was probably a lot of trouble for her.

But her hesitation was always dyed in a certain color.

...She’s always...happy.

Asama had always performed her duties as the Asama Shrine Representative. And now that she knew she could change that “always” to her liking, her

hesitation had become the entrance to a happy change.

Whenever she came into contact with something outside of her usual life, Asama's voice would be full of life in a way Suzu loved to hear.

Suzu thought, *Asama-san is always...so decisive, reliable...and cool. I wish I could have...such a powerful force of will.*

But I love how she acts...whenever she starts something new. It may have been disrespectful to think Asama was "cute" when that happened, but it was also surprising to find that side of her existed.

So this had to be the same.

But her hesitation was even greater than normal this time.

This could force her to change how she worked for the Asama Shrine. If that happened, her "always" would change.

"Is she...troubled?"

"I'm not sure. We saw the 5th Special Duty Officer go in earlier."

"Eh? Mitotsudaira-san?"

But the siblings had said there was no one else in there.

Bell: "Toori-kun, where is...Mitotsudaira-san?"

Me: "Eh? She said she was going to stand guard and went outside."

Bell: "U-um, a moment ago...I heard her...scream?"

Hori-ko: "Toori-sama, did you do something to make Mitotsudaira-sama scream? I see. You seem to have a modicum of guts, so I will promote you from 'pathetic insect' to 'insect'."

Me: "That's not any betterrrrrr! Not better at allllll! And it wasn't me!"

Hori-ko: "Then I shall keep your rank as-is."

Me: "I suppose so, but why do I suddenly want that promotion now...?"

The scream was still a mystery, but since no further problems had come up, it was probably all right.

However...

...Asama-san...

Suzu felt it was best not to mention her. So...

...Go for it.

Suzu focused her ears in Asama's direction and clenched both her fists.

Go for it.

Chapter 29: Shrine Maiden at a New Home

第二十九章

『世話先の巫女』



いや
その
あの
ええと
配点 (言い訳と開き直り)

No

Um

Uh

Well

Point Allocation (Excuses and Doubling Down)

Asama felt regret.

...I think letting Adele escape was a mistake.

That girl really was one of the fastest in Class Plum. She had made a quick dash away, but Asama knew she had to be nearby.

She could see a tail of black hair sticking out from behind a storage cabin five buildings away.

...That's Suzu-san hiding, isn't it?

Suzu would never choose to hide, so someone had to have prevented her from continuing on this way. That was most likely Adele.

Of course, with 5 buildings between them, she would have to talk very loudly for them to hear her. *Suzu-san could probably hear me since she has good ears, but that's fine. I know she'll accept me and she won't tell anyone.*

But, thought Asama while setting the divine chat to everyone except Toori and Kimi.

Asama: "Is anyone spying on me?"

Almost Everyone: "..."

That silence was suspicious.

Once you started down the road of doubt, you could never escape it, but with her class, her suspicions were justified. So...

Asama: "Hello, everyone within 10 meters who isn't moving."

Mal-Ga: "Huh? What's that supposed to mean?"

Asama: “Well, I used the location data gathered by the Asama Shrine – oh, but I can’t see it myself since it’s personal information – and had a sign frame automatically sent to everyone who matched those conditions.”

She had sent it, but it was a trick.

...I hope someone is dumb enough to self-destruct by asking about the sign frame...

However...

Almost Everyone: “...”

No one fell for it.

I’m impressed, she thought, but in a way, it seemed to reveal just how expertly awful everyone in their class was.

Asama: “...Everyone. Why are you all so cement-like when it comes to finding other people’s weaknesses?”

Marube-ya: “Eh? What are you talking about, Asama-chi? Are you doubting us because of some kind of persecution complex?”

Asama: “Hmm.”

When they put it like that, she could not really deny the possibility.

She knew Adele and Suzu were 5 buildings down, but perhaps no one else was spying on her.

Asama: “Yes, maybe I am overthinking this.”

Marube-ya: “Right, right. We’ll be there soon, so you should probably try being less negative.”

I see.

Asama: “If you aren’t there, then you won’t mind if I detonate those sign frames, will you?”

Mal-Ga: “...Asama, I think we can still talk this out.”

Asama: “You give up too easily!”

Six black wings flew from a rooftop two buildings away. They were moving as

far away from her as they could.

It's impressive how they like to double down on their awfulness, thought Asama with a sigh.

...But it looks like my doubts were justified.

Asama: “Then let’s start with Heidi.”

Marube-ya: “Eh!? Wh-why would you do that? You’re supposed to do this in aiueo order, right!? And that would put Toori-kun and Kimi-chan first. Wow, and you would be next Asama-chi. C’mon, Asama-chi, blow yourself up!”

Asama: “Any complaints if I start with Heidi?”

Almost Everyone: “Go right ahead.”

Marube-ya: “Ah! Dammit! What is with all you poor people!? Do you want money that badly!? Then I’ll place a curse on you that gives you long-term employment, effectively ending your life right there! Liiiifetiiiime employyyyyymeeeeent!”

Worshiper: “...I’m pretty much employed already and isn’t that curse usually seen as a blessing?”

Marube-ya: “F-fine then! I’ll place a curse on you that makes you all fat!”

Almost Everyone: “What does that have to do with being a merchant!?”

Asama: “Okay, okay. Here we go, Heidi.”

Marube-ya: “You’re going to blow me up that casually!? Bring it on! Shiro-kuuuun! Solve this with money!”

Money Lover: “If you insist.”

A prostration arrived via divine transmission.

Money Lover: “Asama, how much do you want?”

Asama: “The thing is, I don’t really need much money.”

Money Lover: “And you call yourself human!? Normal people get turned on by talking about money!”

Almost Everyone: “Only you do!”

Marube-ya: “Ignore the poor people and focus on Asama-chi, Shiro-kun! That girl is satisfied with her life because of those giant boobs of hers!”

Asama: “Actually, they’re a lot of trouble. They make my shoulders stiff and block my view all the time...”

“Adele!” shouted Suzu’s voice from 5 buildings down. “C-calm down, calm down.”

Asama felt bad about that kind of collateral damage, but...

Asama: “I have realized something after seeing Mito’s mom for the past few days.”

Smoking Girl: “Hm? What’s that?”

Asama: “People say mine are ‘giant’, but they’re actually pretty normal. Yes.”

Silver Wolf: “You can’t compare yourself to her!”

No, no. Compared to the world at large. Yes, the world at large.

Asama: “Okay, it’s time, Heidi.”

Marube-ya: “That’s a complete non sequitur, Asama-chi! And c’mon, let’s settle this with money! You’re supposed to be nice to us when we offer you money. Now, let’s try that again!”

Gold Mar: “Is that some high-level provocation?”

That’s how I saw it too.

Asama: “Okay, Heidi. Care to explain what you’re doing at such close range?”

Marube-ya: “Eh!? Because this looked like a lucrati-...whoops, no, forget I said that! Umm.”

Hori-ko: “You needed to take a dump, didn’t you?”

Marube-ya: Kh...! N-no, um, uh.”

Hori-ko: “We had curry and meat last night, so I was forced to have quite a challenging battle this morning. But fighting that logic battle while listening to the birds in the Sanada forest could be difficult.”

Flat Vassal: “Well said, Vicereine Horizon!”

Hori-ko: “So Adele, who is suspected of owning not a dog but a bug, agrees with me on that?”

Flat Vassal: “Um, uhh...”

Asama: “Okay, here goes.”

Marube-ya: “W-wait! Yes, I’m...I’m taking a dump right now, so stoooooop! If you wait just a minute, I’ll move away!”

Sticky King: “Doesn’t that excuse do more damage to her life than the original accusation?”

Obscene: “Hmm, that is a struggle I will never know since I let things evaporate as a gas.”

But that was one enemy gone.

...That leaves...

Silver Wolf: “Tomo, aft.”

She looked aftward and saw a small point of light atop the giant raised wall that doubled as a windbreak and as the stern management facility.

It was a familiar light.

Asama: “Naito, can you check to port?”

Naito had summoned Schwarz Fräulein to watch Asama through a sniper telescope spell.

But Asama had just spoken to her via divine transmission.

...To port?

She looked.

Musashi was floating in the Houjou sky facing south, so left meant east. She could see the coast stretching toward Edo in the distance.

But there was nothing out of the ordinary there. She could see a few silhouettes moving along the Edo horizon, but those would be Hashiba’s Edo occupation forces.

...Are we eventually going to fight those?

That will be a big deal, she thought. It would be on the same level as the armada battle, but they wouldn't have any rules saying who the winner had to be.

It would be a serious fight. However...

"There's nothing there."

Just as she said that into the divine transmission, she looked in her telescope spell's frame and saw Asama raise her hand and swing it to the right.

She was saying to dodge in that direction.

...Huh?

First look and now dodge? What's with this? wondered Naito.

Just then, her telescope spell *Magie Figur* shattered as an arrow flew in from Asama's direction.

Gold Mar: "Ohhhhhh! Don't scare me like that!"

Mal-Ga: "Wait, Asama! What are you doing to Margot!? If something happens to her, I'll submit the next one without censorship bars!"

Bell: "Th-that will...only provoke...provoke her."

Asama: "Well, I thought it would be too cruel if I fired without actually letting her see me shoot, so I gave her a warning. Also, I shot her telescope spell, not her."

Azuma: "Um, how far away was that?"

Novice: "Looking from the side, it seemed to be about 700 meters. With spell-assistance and Asama-kun's skill, that was probably an easy shot. Anyone within range of her aim should be on their guard."

Suzu sensed some familiar presences moving away from various parts of Musashino.

...Ah, that's the sound of Urquiaga-kun flying...

They were all interested in this. Part of that would be to tease her or just out of curiosity, but...

...They must be worried...how Asama-san and Toori-kun's...relationship will turn out.

Everyone knew about this on some level.

At Mikawa, she had gotten truly angry with him for once.

It happened when he had activated the ether supply spell.

She always called him “hopeless”, but she could not write him off as “hopeless” where it really mattered.

Everyone understood what that meant. So...

“Nn...”

Go for it, she thought while watching Asama breathe in.

The girl looked around and then turned toward Suzu.

“———”

It felt like Asama had intentionally overlooked her.

But then she faced the door again and opened her mouth.

And just as she prepared to say “Toori-kun”...

“Oh, Asama, you're here.”

The door opened.

A naked apron stood before Asama.

Asama hid her luggage behind her back.

“Umm, are the others here?”

“Not yet. Nate was already here, but she went on a patrol or something. And Horizon stopped by with some bread.”

His words made her blush in her heart. While Horizon was to be expected...

...He didn't include Nate in "everyone"!

Was that because she was more like family?

And Asama knew she had to be in that category as well. Which may have been why he said what he did.

"C'mon in, c'mon in. Oh, use the bottom shoe rack."

She saw that was the same rack that held his and Kimi's shoes.

Using the same spot sent her heart racing and she left the door open.

After taking a breath, she removed her shoes and entered the café.

...Oh, there's Mito's luggage.

She nonchalantly placed her own luggage next to it.

Then he spoke with a smile.

"Thanks."

"No, it's nothing..."

They were close enough that they did not need to thank each other for every little thing. It was always "the usual", "hopeless", or "necessary". So...

"Isn't this the usual-..."

She trailed off as she realized something.

She stood at the entrance to something outside of "the usual".

That was why he had thanked her for coming. That was why he had said something he usually would not have.

...Does that mean...?

He was glad she had come here.

"———"

That thought made her gasp.

"U-um, Toori-kun?"

Asama frantically stepped down onto the entranceway's solid dirt floor.

And...

"Um, uh."

She shut the door.

Gold Mar: "Oh, she's sealed them in."

Mal-Ga: "The Chancellor is in trouble now... And I already gave my imagination a workout with Mitotsudaira's time earlier."

Silver Wolf: "Um, what were you imagining?"

Flat Vassal: "Oh, come to think of it, Suzu-san didn't listen to the sounds inside."

Bell: "I-it would have been wrong...to listen. A-and I knew...Mitotsudaira-san would be...fine."

Silver Wolf: "I'm actually still far from fine, but that's a separate matter... But isn't this like my king holding consecutive interviews? I hope they're okay."

Hori-ko: "Yes, when that boy is forced to negotiate on his own, he will do awful things to win, like the topknot or rock-paper-scissors."

Tachibana Wife: "Master Muneshige, isn't aiming to win by any means necessary a valid strategy for negotiations?"

Tachibana Husband: "Ha ha. It is indeed, Gin. ...What matters most is to use everything available to you and to grasp victory in the end."

Tachibana Wife: "...Thank you very much."

Almost Everyone: "Ohhh..."

Asama shut the door and returned from the hard dirt to the actual café.

...Ah, I did that without putting my shoes back on.

But she had bigger issues.

She needed to reform herself here.

She looked up and saw him. The naked apron was an issue, but...

“Toori-kun?”

“Yeah, what is it?”

Well.

“I carry a lot with me.”

That was why she had placed a lid on it all.

Not everything below the lid would be enjoyable.

Did he really understand that?

“I would be a giant pain in the butt. Believe me.”

“No, you wouldn’t.”

“But...”

“You’re talking about the Asama Shrine and your position there, right?”

She was.

Shrine maidens were allowed to marry, but to the god she served, that meant she no longer put the god first.

That would place a restriction on the power she was given and prevent her from doing what she could before. Which would mean...

...I couldn’t stay by his side and help him to my fullest.

She had to be by his side, but it would be dangerous if she was.

That sounded contradictory, but there was no helping that.

And as far as her official position was concerned, it would be dangerous for the Asama Shrine Representative to lose power now.

Could she really take that step when there was no other heir?

“I...”

I really am, she thought, doing something I shouldn’t be, aren’t I?

So she opened her mouth.

...Should I really be here?

She tried to ask that. He had thanked her before, but she found herself uncertain if that was really what she wanted to do.

“I would be a burden, wouldn’t I?”

Because...

“I’m trying to leave myself in your hands because of your and Horizon’s open invitation and because of what Mito’s mom said. ...So I would be a burden, wouldn’t I?”

“Why?”

He tilted his head forward.

He acted like he really did not know what she meant.

So she wrinkled her brow and explained.

“Listen, Toori-kun.”

“Yeah?”

“This time, I’m forcing something onto you without really thinking it through. Um, to put it more poetically, I’m leaving my feelings in your hands. Isn’t that what you would call a burden?”

She asked.

He crossed his arms, frowned, and tilted his head.

“Hmm...?”

“What is that ‘hm’ for?”

“Well, Asama? Um.”

“What is it?”

...Why am I answering like normal!?

Kimi would probably die of laughter if she heard this. In fact, she had to be in her room, so she was probably burying her face in her pillow to suppress the

noise.

I can't believe this, thought Asama.

Why did she always feel things unrelated to being the Asama Shrine Representative or a shrine maiden when she was around these people?

...Trying to act dignified is useless with them...

She silently sighed at the fact that she just had to accept it and he straightened his tilted head. But his “hm” expression remained.

“Asama, do you think you would be a burden on me?”

“Yes, I’m forcing all of this onto you...”

“We’re the ones that told you to come join us, so you’re not forcing anything on anyone, are you?”

He was right about that. And she remembered what Horizon and the others had said the night before.

...They wouldn't be able to get along very well without me with them...

Part of her wanted to suggest they hire a good maid, but they likely saw something other than that in her. She felt that was what it meant to leave your daily life with someone and take responsibility for that, but...

“Toori-kun, you wouldn’t think of me as a burden?”

“I would be grateful to have you with us. Do you know why that is?”

“No, um...why would you be grateful?”

“Because I can’t imagine living without you.”

“Y-you’re just flattering me with that!”

“Now, now,” said the idiot while raising both hands to calm her.

He wanted to live with her.

“I think you coming to live with us is a cause for celebration and I can’t see any reason why it would be a burden. Besides, I’m like a bunny: I’ll die from loneliness. So how should I put this...?”

“What?”

“I can just be myself around you.”

So...

“Everything would be way easier with you here, so I’d be really happy.”

“Well, um, I...”

She too had accepted the odd fact of life that he would come visit her.

And she realized something else too.

“Toori-kun?”

“What?”

“I don’t think of you as a burden either.”

That was it.

“I’m the same. I want to depend on having you around.”

His eyes widened a little at that.

Then he smiled.

“Then this isn’t something you feel obligated to do. You’re really coming here.”

The tension left his shoulders.

“In that case, I’ll take responsibility for every little thing that makes it hard for you to live here.”

Asama was dumbfounded.

“———”

She said nothing because she did not know how to respond.

And he said more while scratching his head in a fairly unreliable way.

“I’m sure there will be some tricky stuff with the Asama Shrine. ...But I’ll do something about it.”

“Th-that’s not possible.”

“It is. If it wasn’t, I wouldn’t have asked you to come here. Also,” he said. “If things aren’t working out, we have everyone else.”

“...Everyone else?”

“Judge. Even if you can’t do your Asama Shrine stuff anymore, you can work at what you can do while everyone else makes up for what you can’t do. ...I get the feeling they wouldn’t do that for me, but there’s no way they could just ignore you if you were in need.”

“Relying on people like that...isn’t how I do things.”

“Then,” he smiled. “I’ll do something about it, so you help me out.”

She thought about what he meant.

...You idiot.

A quiet laugh escaped her mouth because of what this idiot was saying.

“You say you’ll take responsibility but now you’re telling me to help you take responsibility?”

“You wouldn’t be satisfied with yourself if you didn’t, would you?”

He pointed at her luggage which she had placed right alongside Mitotsudaira’s.

“You gathered your courage and came here. ...If that will cause problems, we can think about it and do something about it. You couldn’t irresponsibly just ignore those things, right?”

That was true.

But she belatedly felt heat in her cheeks and said something.

“Um, Toori-kun?”

“Hm? What?”

“A lot about this is still up in the air, so there is something I can’t come out and say at this point.”

The groundwork was not complete, so she would lose a lot if she took action now.

So even if she had “entered” this home, she wanted to confirm something about herself first. And once she knew it was okay for her to truly “enter” this home...

...It starts there.



That would be the final lid.

She had already opened it and seen what was inside and she was aware of that fact, but...

“Once I can convince myself and feel more at ease with this...I’ll say it for myself.”

She would speak the words that allowed and permitted herself everything.

“So can you wait until then?”

She had said it.

I said it, thought Asama.

Her gaze gradually lowered.

She could not look at him head-on.

But when she looked down, she saw his naked apron.

...I-I worked up the courage for something like an attempted confession and this is the view I get!?

Also, she added while thinking back on what she had just done.

...That was backwards!!!!

It was normally the guy who was supposed to say that.

That was clearly backwards.

In a game, it was the line the protagonist said to the heroine. Saying he would be back for her once he had grown worthy of her was generally a death flag or an NTR flag, but it was that sort of pretentious line.

But, she thought. *It was still backwards!!*

“————”

She could not believe it.

She was hanging her head more out of exasperation with herself than from bashfulness.

She was aware she had closed her lid and was automatically selling herself too highly.

And in the process, she had ultimately reversed their positions.

...Now I've done it...

But there was another way of looking at this.

“Asama.”

She looked up and saw him there. With his usual expression.

“Then this is our little secret, okay?”

“...Yes, I suppose so.”

That was right.

From now on, she would carry this secret in her heart.

Mitotsudaira probably had something like this too.

Horizon, Kimi, and the others would as well.

Everyone knew those things existed.

And her latest secret was this.

...Oh, then Mito, Kimi, and Horizon will more or less know what it is...

But a secret was a secret.

They had confirmed that they were prepared to follow through with their respective feelings, but she had not yet actually confessed. However...

“Toori-kun?”

“Ah? Yeah?”

“I-I still haven't really told my dad about this and I didn't bring as much luggage as Mito, but, um, this is an important time period.” She breathed in and continued. “So I will be staying here for a while. So like we said before...”

A smile escaped with her words.

“I would appreciate it if you could just be yourself and depend on having me around.”

Flat Vassal: “She isn’t coming out...”

Mal-Ga: “So starting in the middle of the day is an option for them. I’ll have to add that to my list of possibilities.”

Righteousness: “Hey, I just finished prepping Righteousness. What are all of you doing?”

Hori-ko: “Judge. Naruze-sama fled after a bomb threat, Heidi-sama is defecating, Naito-sama was sniped at, and Mitotsudaira-sama screamed.”

Righteousness: “Could someone explain properly?”

Flat Vassal: “Yeah, that’s not much of an explanation is it? Umm, to put those in the proper order, the 5th Special Duty Officer screamed, the 4th Special Duty Officer was found by Asama-san while preparing a porn doujin on the roof, and the 3rd Special Duty Officer was sniped at. Oh, and the Treasurer’s Aide is doing battle in the bathroom to avoid getting blown up.”

Righteousness: “Could someone *else* explain properly?”

Flat Vassal: “B-but, Satomi Vice President! That was a serious answer!”

Righteousness: “I didn’t want a serious answer; I wanted a good one!”

Sticky King: “Calm down, Yoshy! Good answers are hard to come by in this world!”

Obscene: “That’s right! The pursuit of them is a noble thing, but not if you refuse to accept the truth because of it. You must be able to flexibly accept the more bizarre answers as well!”

Unturning: “But when they’re too bizarre, they can be rather incomprehensible.”

Uqui: “...Narumi, choose your words better.”

Almost Everyone: “How about denying what she said!?”

Marube-ya: “And I’m not really pooping!”

Smoking Girl: “It probably doesn’t matter anymore, but...Suzu.”

Bell: “Oh, right. ...You can...go in. Because...I can hear...a knife.”

Gold Mar: “Murder?”

Bell: “N-no, not like...that. ...It’s the sound of...Asama-san...cooking.”

Suzu smiled and nodded at the sound reaching her ears.

She tapped Adele’s shoulder with the same tempo.

It had to be the sound of Asama slicing up an eggplant.

But Suzu was more focused on the strength and rhythm of the sound than the action it represented.

“That’s a...good sound.”

Yes.

“It means Asama-san...is happy.”

Fukushima heard the distant sound of something being struck.

She must have been asleep. Her eyes were staring at something dark.

It was not night. Her eyelids were closed.

She had come to, starting with her ears.

She was still enough asleep that she had to consciously open her eyes. And...

“—————”

When she opened them, she found the sky was still blue.

...*Oh?*

She was lying on her back. However...

...*I thought I was in the wheat field with the waterway running through it.*

She had pursued and fought Sanada’s Miyoshi Nyuudou.

And she had made a mistake in the end and self-destructed.

She had known she would be trapped by the enemy’s counterattack if she

kept going, so she had caused her acceleration spell to malfunction and send her flying.

That had been a crude method, but she felt it had been her best option to escape that battle.

As a result, she had been thrown into the wheat field.

“————”

Except not.

This was not the wheat field.

She lay face up on the grassy dirt ground.

A gentle breeze blew in from below her feet and it carried the scent of river algae.

...I must be near that small river.

What was her state as she lay there?

...Now, then.

She shifted her focus to her surroundings and found there was a resilient pillow below her head and something softer than a pillow resting on her forehead.

The overhead object obstructed her view. It was also heavy and sweaty.

What is this? she wondered as she lifted it up. And...

“Kyah.”

She heard Kiyomasa’s voice and the overhead object shook.

That was when Fukushima caught on.

“So this is Kiyomasa-dono’s chest.”

“Y-you’re awake?”

“Testament. Where are we?”

“This is a path running alongside the wheat field. I am healing and examining you.”

Kiyomasa's answer told Fukushima something.

"...So the enemy really did escape."

No, that was not it. There was something else she had to say.

"So I let the enemy escape."

**Chapter 30: People of the Present at the End
of the Hall**

第三十章

『突き当たりの今人達』



そこに何があると
目の前にして問う事
配点（見えているもの）

You ask what it is

While it is right in front of you

Point Allocation (What You Can See)

While sitting or lying down on the path through the sunny wheat field, they were blocked from view.

Fukushima sighed in that location that felt wide open but also placed several barriers around them.

She was currently resting in Kiyomasa's lap.

...And she told me not to move.

Kiyomasa had said she was healing and examining Fukushima.

"I did some thinking and started studying the Shinto side of things recently. At Mito, I realized I was at a disadvantage when outside of Catholicism's reach. So I've started coming up with hybrid spell forms that combine a variety of things."

Ether light grew from the ground like vines and supported Fukushima's hips and back.

They were likely removing the heat and pain. To assist, Kiyomasa held up a Shinto charm to adjust the distribution of vines.

...They have a definite scent to them.

It was a minty aroma. She did not know if that was a trait of the spell or if Kiyomasa had added it.

She would be free to speak like this, so Fukushima asked Kiyomasa a question while belatedly noticing the spell cloth placed on her hip.

"What happened to the enemy?"

"You drove him away."

That would be the interpretation Kiyomasa had relayed to the others.

"I thank thee."

"For what?"

“For arranging that for me.”

Kiyomasa sighed, unseen beyond her breasts.

Did she feel exasperated?

...I cannot believe this.

“Essentially, this is two losses in a row for me.”

“You drove off the enemy in both cases.”

“But I did not defeat them.” Fukushima held her right hand in the air. “I am not achieving the results necessary for the leader of the Ten Spears...no, necessary for achieving our goal. At this rate,” she said. “We will have difficulty maintaining our position in this age of Warring States, not to mention confronting Musashi.”

Just as she said that, Kiyomasa’s voice arrived from beyond her breasts.

“Fukushima-sama. ...Should I stop healing you?”

Fukushima listened to Kiyomasa.

“If I don’t heal you, you can take a break here. I can even discuss it with the others and have you removed from the main force in tomorrow’s Paris attack for the Invasion of Mouri.”

And she went on to say more.

“Fukushima-sama, you’re tired, aren’t you?”

That did not follow from what she had said before.

But she did not correct herself.

In her mind, those seemingly separate statements were effectively the same.

“I am sorry,” said Fukushima.

“Do not apologize until you have given up on everything. ...Or is that what you meant?”

“No,” responded Fukushima. “But how am I supposed to win?”

“Isn’t that what you told that underclassman named Kani last night? You grasp the flow of battle.”

“Some things are easier said than done.”

“You shouldn’t sound so confident when you say that.”

That warning silenced Fukushima.

She was aware she was falling into a vicious cycle.

When she received a negative result, she asked herself negative questions to try to learn from it, but gaining an awareness of her deficiencies caused her to lose confidence in herself which led to further negative results.

She wished she could snap herself out of it.

But...

“How am I supposed to win?”

“There is no need to win at the moment.”

Fukushima tried to sit up when she heard Kiyomasa’s response. She wanted to look the other girl in the eye when she asked why.

“Nh.”

But when she gathered strength in her abs and sat up, she only pressed against the bottom of those giant breasts.

And she decelerated.

When she lifted her head starting from her stomach, those breasts stopped her.

...What is this...!?

She lost to the pressure.

She could not keep pushing herself up. No, her momentum was absorbed as the breasts deformed.

...Such an incredible shock-absorption effect...!

Pushed back down by their weight, Fukushima returned to Kiyomasa’s lap. Then Kiyomasa cleared her throat and spoke.

“Listen, Fukushima-sama. I am healing and examining you, so please stay still.”

“Testament. But...”

“Yes, you’re asking about what I just said, aren’t you?” she said from beyond her breasts. “There is only one crucial point at which we must win. That is all we need. We only have to stop Musashi when it is time to stop them. That is why the Ten Spears exist.”

“But victory here will make things easier in our later battles and for the other units.”

“Let’s worry about others only after taking care of ourselves, Fukushima-sama,” said Kiyomasa. “You do not ‘need to win’ because of later battles or the other units. You can think about those things after you are able to win.”

Kiyomasa was saying the ends and the means were different.

Fukushima of course thought she understood that.

But, she began in her heart.

“We have no time. ...The battle in Paris begins tomorrow.”

“Are you saying you will ‘lose’ in the battle tomorrow?”

“Well...”

Fukushima tried to sit up and was stopped once more.

After about two seconds, Kiyomasa held out her hands to tell her to calm down.

Fukushima took a breath, lowered her head once more, and then let her shoulders relax.

And she spoke.

“I am worried.”

“I can tell just by looking at you, Fukushima-sama.”

“That only depresses me further.”

“I really need you to cheer up soon.”

Kiyomasa's tone made it sound more like casual advice than a warning, and that made it all the harder for Fukushima.

...She makes it sound like I merely made a mistake while cooking...

Was this problem really only on that level?

Meanwhile, Kiyomasa brushed up her hair.

"I don't want to constantly be asking each other if we can do this."

"That would be difficult."

"Just listen," said Kiyomasa. "We have our current positions because we forced someone else out of them. We have these positions because it was decided we can do it better than those other people. ...If that doesn't mean we can do it, then what does? Listen," she said again. "Let's rid ourselves of worry. That is enough."

"That is enough?"

"Testament," she quietly responded. "If we get worried and cower back, we won't be able to move. Conversely, if we're in high spirits, we can move even more than usual. ...And to move means to work toward our objective, but while it is logic and reason that control how we move, it is our emotions that act as a stopper or accelerator for those actions."

She took a breath.

"To put it another way, feeling worried or in high spirits does not change the basic abilities of your body. ...But how much of that ability you can draw out is influenced by the reason-driven tactics and the emotions that drive them. ...At the moment, you score well on the tactics side, but your worry is preventing you from using them effectively."

"Kiyo-dono, thou really are calm..."

Fukushima was not quite sure how to put it, but Kiyomasa seemed like "an adult".

Yoshiaki would also seem that way sometimes, so maybe people with the surname Katou tended to be more mature. *No, one's surname does not determine their personality.*

“Is there a trick to staying so calm?”

“It’s more of a secret than a trick.”

“There is something!?”

That was a shocking truth.

She heard Kiyomasa laughing up above those breasts. And...

“Fukushima-sama, let’s have a quick sparring match later. To prepare for tomorrow.”

“To train?”

“Testament. As I said before...I would like to spar at the transport ship pool.” She then grabbed Fukushima’s shoulders. “Okay, Fukushima-sama, your healing and examination are complete. I can see how you are doing when we spar.”

“The others are probably up to their usual nonsense right about now...”

A mop-wielding figure said that while looking up into the sky.

It was Noriki. He was swabbing the deck with several rigging hooks hanging from his waist.

The afternoon sun was already sinking and the summer heat was reaching its peak. Even if it was a transport ship, there was not much going on on the deck, so the deck crew called over to Noriki.

“Hey, boy! You might be restless, but how about you take a short break!?”

“This is who I am. I’m just doing what I always do, so don’t worry about it.”

“You sure are tough!! Do you have a heat-resistance divine protection and enough water!?”

When he held up the bamboo bottle hanging from his hip, they raised their hands in surrender.

“Use as much water as you want! We’ll resupply in Suwa soon!”

“I appreciate it.”

The transport ship he was swabbing belonged to the engine division.

...They put this thing through a lot.

Musashi's transport ships were generally owned by companies, merchants, or Musashi itself.

The ones owned by companies or merchants would be decorated and otherwise made to look nice.

The ones owned by Musashi would be maintained by the automatons and were always as good as new.

But the engine division's ones were different. They looked grimy, but they were tough.

He could easily tell their stance was just to keep it moving, keep it transporting, and to keep it sturdy.

"I haven't ridden on many engine division transport ship's. But well...how should I put it?"

"Hm? What?" asked Hiro via sign frame since she was cooling off in the shadow of the bridge. "How should you put what?"

"Judge. There are some stains here you don't want removed, aren't there?"

"Oh, yeah, yeah. We've got a pretty dangerous belief that oil stains act as a lubricant. Don't touch anything near the engine or on the exterior seams. As for rust stains, what you see covering the surface is the rust we're intentionally allowing to come off."

"What happens to the bolts when you do that?"

"They use a special lock, so even if the rust gets inside, we can remove the core of the bolts and take them apart."

Noriki looked to his feet where a bolt the size of his hand was placed in a hole to hold the exterior in place. When viewed from above, he could tell the bolt had a plastic core and could be broken down into four pieces from the center.

"That's apparently so they won't bend and break or get permanently bent even if the ship bends. Since the automatons don't go to the engine division often, we do things a bit differently than the ships outside."

“So these are handmade?”

“No. The engine division came up with the idea, but IZUMO produced them. They’ve apparently made their way to other nations too. I mean, they don’t have automaton maintenance, so they actually want this kind of bolt even more.”

“In that case,” said Noriki. “Do Mikawa and Houjou not use this kind of bolt?”

“I guess not. I don’t really know since I haven’t actually seen the receipts, but it would make sense. ...Mikawa and Houjou are pretty technologically advanced, but if you ask me, they’re better at the more delicate things and they wouldn’t have seen the need for crude things like this.”

“I imagine not,” agreed Noriki while moving to a new cleaning spot.

This was one of the areas he was not supposed to clean.

Hiro continued speaking as the sign frame followed along next to him.

“What do you think about things back at Musashi?”

“If you mean the afternoon meeting, that’s none of my concern.”

“Even if they’re making decisions about the duels with Houjou and Mouri? They say they’re going to work out the details soon.”

“Working that out is none of my concern either.”

“But you want to duel their Chancellor, don’t you?”

“That’s why I’m on this ship.”

“It would be great if you got to.”

“Depending on how it turns out, it might not be so great.”

Hiro tilted her head at that.

“Even if you fail, can’t you focus on what you gained in the process and use that to do better next time?”

“Don’t ask me that when I’m out in the sun.”

“You have a point. ...I have shaved ice here. Want some?”

“Can you save me some for later?”

“It’s now or never.”

“Fine then.” Noriki’s shoulders drooped. “I’ll join you.”

“You’re surprisingly easy to get along with.”

“Only because Suwa still isn’t in view.”

“Oh.” Hiro smiled bitterly in the shade. “You’re out on the deck because you want to see Suwa. Then you should move further out front.”

“I’ll do that next time,” said Noriki as he walked toward the bridge. “When will I be able to catch up to the others?”

Gin walked alone to the Main Blue Thunder.

She was walking to Musashino from their home on Tama.

And as she crossed the thick rope passageway between ships...

...Even with the winds of this elevation, Musashino is still very hot.

She held a stacked bento box of summer foods in her left arm and she operated a sign frame with her right hand. She had her prosthetic arms set to cooling mode.

It was hot. It had only been for a few days, but the time spent on the surface in Sanada territory made it feel all the more hot.

The atmosphere on the ship was maintained, but the summer sun on the ship’s surface still contained heat. Especially near the outer hull. The armor panels were more densely packed there, so the accumulated heat had trouble escaping.

She had been told that coolant water was pumped through hardened bamboo pipes within the armor panels, but that water rapidly heated up. She would sometimes see additional heat insulation tanks on the surface, but those may have been gathering the hot water and sending it to the bathhouses and such.

...It’s all so robust.

Fortunately, when the wide-range armor panels heated up, the moisture was

taken from the air. The outer hull area lacked the humid heat often found in the Far East and instead had the dry heat of a desert.

Tres España was a dry region, so the similar air felt nostalgic.

That outer hull was generally where the transport district wide blocks were located.

Despite the summer heat, Musashino was being repaired at the moment. The transport district was busy dealing with the approaching transport ships and the unloaded cargo. Also...

“Are they rethinking their defenses with the Siege of Odawara and Kantou Liberation coming up?”

As she passed by the transport district, a large sign frame was being used to send instructions to the various team leads.

The Siege of Odawara was expected to be fought on the surface, but there was a good chance that the Kantou Liberation would be a fleet battle. Because it would be fought across a wide area including both Edo and Satomi.

Until now, they had focused their repairs on the horizontal and lower armor, but now they were shifting toward the armor and maintenance on the ship’s deck.

Of course, the Siege of Odawara was tomorrow, so there was only so much they could do. So instead of adding armor panels to the surface area, they seemed to be reinforcing it with spells. It was all based on instructions from “Musashino”: “Place bundles of large armor charms in the cases and connect them to the terminals in regions requiring armor. We will add slots in the terminals, so use those slots to insert them. Over.”

Hearing that, the men quickly gathered together.

“Chief! We’re supposed to place the armor charm bundles in cases and use the slots to insert them, right!?”

“You fool! You pronounced it all wrong! ‘Musashino’-san says ‘insert’ way cooler than that!”

“Ehh!? That was ‘Asakusa’-san’s ‘insert’! I will not let this stand!”

The men were working hard while forcing their pickiness onto others.

...I kind of understand why Tres España lost to Musashi.

She had a number of theories, but her latest one was just how “oppressive” things were here.

She had a feeling her theory would change again tomorrow, but she had started to think that looking into that issue was pointless and she was wondering if she should make more of an effort to hide that investigation since she was starting to view this place as her home.

Whatever the case, she was amazed that those men could actually do their job while bickering so much.

They would almost certainly achieve decent results tomorrow.

As for Gin...

“...Ah.”

Once she passed the outer hull area, the air rapidly cooled.

It was still hot, but the floor was made of packed dirt instead of the hardened wood or armor panels. It was actually more humid, but there was more shade.

Large linked wagons loaded with materials approached while going the other way.

And she heard the hammering of repairs coming from the underground central area.

“...Musashi really is preparing for battle.”

While noting that their resolve had changed considerably while Class Plum was at Sanada, Gin faced forward.

Down the road, there was a large hole in Musashino.

And the Main Blue Thunder was beyond that.

She saw the English Princess and the ninja crossing it on a suspension bridge. The Mito Lord noticed them from the other end of the bridge.

Just by walking around a bit on this city aerial ship, Gin would run into familiar

faces like this.

“Now, what is going to happen to this place tomorrow and beyond?”

Masazumi knew she had arrived late.

They had invited Mouri Terumoto and Houjou Ujinao to a buffet-style meal starting in the evening at the Main Blue Thunder. They would use that as a chance to make some decisions about the Siege of Odawara, the Tenshou Jingo Conflict, and the Invasion of Mouri being held the following day.

“I thought that café would seem a little small, but I see they found a way to get around that.”

The café’s entrance-side wall had been removed.

The café portion was now a roofed terrace.

The eating space was designated by a fence that had been placed in the road running in front of the café.

That created an open-air dining area as wide as the Aoi home.

An extra stone pavement block had been added in front of the house across the road, so the width of the road was maintained. However...

“Did you get permission for this?”

“Yeah. Shiro went to the house across the street with a box of candy, so they know more or less what’s going on.”

An old woman holding a dog smiled and bowed in front of the house diagonally across the road. *Oh, is that dog named Josephine? I think the Aoi Sister or Asama mentioned that before.*

“Oh, Masazumi. Could you step to the side real quick?”

Asama wore an apron over her shrine maiden uniform and she held stacked bento boxes full of stewed eggplant in both arms.

They were already lining up the food on the party tables set up on the road. Asama looked across the few tables there.

“This is the Far Eastern table, isn’t it? Kimi? Huh? Where’d she go...?”

Asama looked back in search of the Aoi Sister and her hair lacked the ear-shaped sensory devices usually seen with shrine maiden outfits. Did that mean she was not “on duty” at the moment?

...She works a lot regardless.

“A swimsuit this morning, a summer uniform earlier, and now a shrine maiden outfit. You sure change clothes a lot, Asama.”

“I’m just used to changing. I changed into this real quick over there.”

Masazumi saw everyone come to a stop.

Asama also seemed to realize what she had said.

“Ah,” she said. “N-no, that’s normal! It’s perfectly normal, isn’t it!? Changing clothes at the worksite is perfectly normal!”

Unturning: “What’s the point of denying this?”

Uqui: “Narumi, futile resistance is a standard skill for a Musashi resident. And refusing to believe these claims is another standard skill, so worry not.”

It sounded crazy, but sadly, it was all true.

And just as Asama began sweating from the silence around her, one of the Aoi home’s windows suddenly opened.

It was a narrow lowered window and the Aoi Sister stuck her head out from inside.

She held the chest cloth of Asama’s uniform in front of her face.

“An eye mask...! A-Asama, this is too big! Now I can’t get any shuteye while everyone else works! Should I return the defective product to the Asama Shrine!?”

“You know what that really is, don’t you!? And bring the rest of the food labels out here, Kimi!”

Oh, that’s right, remembered Masazumi.

...Asama is staying at the Aoi house starting today, isn’t she?

She could not stay there permanently because of her work at the Asama Shrine, but it seemed Mitotsudaira would be moving in too.

Vice President: “It is a relief to know Mitotsudaira and Asama will be right there with Aoi and Horizon.”

Mal-Ga: “It really is. Now I know I’ll always have plenty of material to draw from and it will create a lot more interest in the readers.”

Gold Mar: “That’s right. Mito-tsan, Asama-chi! Ga-chan and I fully support your decision! So don’t worry!”

Silver Wolf: “That’s more than enough reason to worry!”

That kind of energy was a good thing.

Aoi was sure to relax more if there was a lot going on around him.

As far as Masazumi could tell, the idiot did more dangerous things the more serious his surroundings were.

...It’s always at the most serious moments that he does the topknot or brings fireworks to morning assembly...

In a way, did that mean he was paying close attention to his surroundings?

But that idiot and Horizon had received two supporters in an unexpected fashion.

Vice President: I would normally want to ask Crossunite or Urquiaga, but that’s not really an option.”

Mal-Ga: “Want me to use that for material?”

Scarred: “If that’s my fault, then I’m sorry.”

Gold Mar: “Hm? It’s not your fault, Ma-yan. The thread titled ‘It’s That Ninja’s Fault’ is really picking up steam.”

10ZO: “Not again! You set something up again, didn’t you!? Oh, but anything caused by Mary-dono joining Musashi is my responsibility, so I don’t mind at all.”

Tachibana Wife: “Then how will you take responsibility for not being able to act as the Chancellor’s bodyguard, 1st Special Duty Officer?”

10ZO: “Th-that is a difficult question when presented so bluntly!”

Mal-Ga: “With your body... Yes, I understand completely. That’s the only option.”

10ZO: “I don’t understand at all.”

Azuma: “Do you mean doing hard labor?”

Gold Mar: “Ga-chan, you don’t have to laugh that hard. And you don’t have to get so excited about misinterpreting the term hard labor.”

Masazumi had heard the Technohexen were monitoring them from an elevated position that allowed for sniping, but what were they doing?

Meanwhile, Naomasa spoke while starting to install the fence.

Smoking Girl: “Well, this has been a meaningful change for a number of reasons. Besides, not even the Musashi has been a safe zone recently.”

Tonbokiri: “Judge, that is correct. Isa-dono and others of the Ten Braves boarded the ship, the Terrestrial Dragon Torahide-dono flew onboard, and the Celestial Dragons Sasuke-dono and Saizou-dono snuck onboard.”

Flat Vassal: “I just realized. Wasn’t it all done by Sanada?”

Everyone fell silent again.

Eventually, Futayo turned toward Masazumi from where she stood guard at the entrance.

“Should I have completely beaten up Nobuyuki-dono the other day?”

“No, the Sanada Chancellor is from their pro-Musashi group. Also, I’m a bit surprised what you did to him didn’t count as ‘completely’ beating him up.”

Naomasa stood up from the other side of the fence and she used her prosthetic arm to carry a portion of the fence.

“I guess I’ll set a double layer and add an industrial defense charm in between. Asama-chi, did you bring one that provides data stealth?”

“No, I didn’t bring any industrial charms. But I can use a temporary amplification spell on a normal charm to strengthen it, so let’s do that instead.”

Masazumi did not know much about this, but she could guess that took incredible skill.

Naomasa removed a portion of the road's stone-paved block to install the fence. Lifting up the road seemed like a rare thing to do, but her utter lack of hesitation suggested she had experience doing it.

Everyone gained something different from their life on the Musashi.

And that brought something to mind for Masazumi.

...I need to do something that lives up to that.

Mary held Tenzou's hand and entered the eating space built in front of the Main Blue Thunder.

The wooden arch at the entrance was still there, so...

...I should ask them later if I can decorate it with flowers.

I should choose something that won't wither in the summer sun and heat, she decided while mentally perusing the available options.

"...?"

Then she noticed something.

Everyone was performing some kind of work or chatting, but there was one person who simply watched over it all.

"Lady Masazumi?"

When Mary called out to her, Masazumi's shoulders shook and she turned around. For a moment, it was the confused reaction of someone who had forgotten something. But then she smiled with her eyebrows somewhat bent.

"Y-yes. What is it, Mary? And Mitotsudaira too."

Instead of Mary, the response came from Mitotsudaira who had joined her and Tenzou on the way here.

She first looked to Mary with a look that said "She was, wasn't she?"

"You zoned out there for a moment, didn't you?"

“Yes, sort of. I was thinking.”

She must have thought that was not enough of an answer because she smiled bitterly.

“I was just noticing that we’ve gathered people with a wide variety of skills.”

Hori-ko: “Now, everyone, we have Masazumi-sama’s approval to toot our own horns.”

Tachibana Wife: “I am very proud of the Far Eastern-style tortilla I made today. I was skeptical about serving it to other people with the duck soy sauce that Master Muneshige likes, but since he said I should, I worked hard on it.”

Tachibana Husband: “Ha ha ha. I love how much of a hard worker you are today, Gin.”

Scarred: “Judge. On the way here, Master Tenzou gave me a water lily.”

10ZO: “And, Mary-dono, it was very thoughtful of you to prepare a change of clothes for me as soon as we got back to our room.”

Flat Vassal: “Th-that’s not tooting your own horn! It’s just a husband and wife seeing who can brag about the other more!”

Marube-ya: “Wait! Shiro-kun just gave me some vegetables! It’s nappa cabbage! Let’s see, ‘Make sure this lasts us 3 days. Then we will have money leftover in the food budget.’ You’re so bold, Shiro-kun!! Oh, does this mean we have to wait until the weekend to enjoy any meat!?”

Uqui: “Narumi, your mechanical noises are nice and short today...”

Unturning: “That’s because I reverted them to their Musashi settings. And as far as I can tell from a distance, you’re really showing off with your thruster heat today.”

Righteousness: “...Does that count as bragging?”

Four Eyes: “Then let me take a stab at it. ...I see you’ve started sending me name inheritors’ autographs without me asking. This will really help build up my collection. ...Your turn.”

Novice: “You’re forcing me to say something!? ...And besides, you want those autographs, right? It’s just that we happen to meet a lot of name inheritors while flying around the world. That’s all it is.”

Four Eyes: “...Then if I get a name inheritor’s autograph, I can send one to you too.”

Novice: “You could start by giving me yours!”

Four Eyes: “Send a certain form and I will send it back signed.”

Almost Everyone: “Eeeek!”

Tonbokiri: “Everyone really does have something, don’t they? What about you, Masazumi?”

Vice President: “I think getting through that earlier meeting is impressive enough... Asama, Mitotsudaira, what about you two?”

Asama: “No, we don’t really have anything to say... Right, Mito?”

Silver Wolf: “Yes, nothing at all... Isn’t that right? Yes.”

Mal-Ga: “I smell some good material here... I can tell. I can so tell...”

Worshiper: “I feel like this partner bragging is gradually transforming into something else...”

Masazumi relaxed her shoulders as she listened to everyone’s conversation.

... I guess this means everyone is observing each other pretty well.

She had thought that was a product of knowing each other for so long in the confined space of the Musashi, but an outsider like her and former enemies like the Tachibana Couple, Mary, and the Date Vice Chancellor were fitting in as well.

...For better and for worse, their overall framework of relationships is really loosely built.

They all were easy to get along with and they would readily tease you where it would hit you hardest. But even when they had suspicions, they would not dig too deeply into each other’s issues. They might touch on them, but they would

not help resolve them or join them in that resolution.

Nevertheless, they would always cheer each other on and tell them to do things for themselves in the end.

That occasional support had saved Masazumi a few times already.

She would rather it not take the form of pulling down her pants like at Mikawa, but that was likely the same basic idea.

“Honestly...” she muttered while looking around.

...Just because I’m a politician and negotiator doesn’t mean there’s nothing I can do.

She could of course cook. Her mother had taught her. But at the moment...

“I’d like to put together a report to give you all in advance, so is there some space I could use? Oh, and Neshinbara and Bertoni...oh, he’s at the vegetable market. Well, anyone with a moment to spare can answer my questions.”

“Sure thing, Seijun. Let’s head inside for a moment. We’ll open up some space there. Also, Horizon, Asama, and Nate, you three come too.”

“Judge,” said Horizon as she stood up from moving the potted plants in the shade below the eaves.

Asama and Mitotsudaira also responded:

“Um, us too, Toori-kun?”

“Yeah. Masa, you come too in a bit.”

“Sure,” agreed Naomasa.

“I was thinking we could open up a room. After all...”

“Heh heh. Ex – act – ly.”

What, what? thought Masazumi as the Aoi Sister stepped out while roughly wearing her summer uniform.

“We can use this as a chance to mark the end of one stage and the beginning of the next one. Come on in, you two. And you, Horizon. ...We have something to show you.”

Namely...

“There’s a room in here that Horizon used when she used to live here. It’s empty now, though. We’re going to open it today, so come see.”

Horizon looked up at what Kimi said.

She accepted some tea brewed by Asama while below the eaves of the open air café.

“You mean the room used by the previous Horizon...that is, my original model?”

Flat Vassal: “That’s a rather dynamic way of looking at the distinction...”

Righteousness: “Looking at it that way, am I something like a prototype model?”

Wise Sister: “Don’t do it, everyone! Don’t even think that Yoshy has already reached her final model! Some girls these days work day after day to fight against their inherited traits and body type!”

Vice President: “That was pretty cruel, Aoi Sister. ...But anyway, Horizon’s room is here?”

“Yeah,” replied the idiot who was wearing a summer uniform for once.

He shook his butt so the skirt fluttered as he turned around. He did that to gesture toward the kitchen entrance in the back of the café.

“C’mon. Oh, you come too if you’re ready, Masa. I can tell you our plan for remodeling the house.”

“Judge,” said Naomasa as she stood up beyond the fence. She grabbed the double fence with her prosthetic arm and shook it. “That should be good enough. ...And I will be charging for my services, so be ready for that.”

She then approached with her arm still holding onto the fence.

...Huh?

On an intellectual level, Horizon knew the girl had to have jumped over it.

But it had looked an awful lot like she had simply passed right through it.

“Naomasa-sama, I have an important question before we move on: What was that?”

“Ah? I just used my prosthetic arm.”

Horizon did not know what that meant, but someone tapped on her shoulder: Mitotsudaira.

She smiled with her eyebrows lowered.

“On the arm’s side, she lifted up her body and carried it onto our side. The arm’s balance can be tricky when her body is lifted up, so she took a crouching pose that lifted her legs over the fence. Her head and shoulders remained at the same height, so it can be hard to tell what happened when you aren’t used to it.”

“Is it that unusual?” asked Naomasa. “There are a lot of narrow areas and areas you don’t want to step on in the engine division, so this is pretty normal for anyone with a prosthetic arm.”

Then they heard a creaking from the fence by the entrance.

Narumi, who had arrived with Gin, was holding her forehead on the other side of the fence.

Gin was fixing her slipping hat and Narumi was pinching the bridge of her nose.

“I was careless...!”

“Well, that was sad.”

Next to Narumi, Urquiaga looked to his partner and let his shoulders slump.

“Narumi, even if it sounds like fun, you really shouldn’t try things while we talk.”

“No,” said Gin. “That was my fault for doing it while watching the 6th Special Duty Officer.”

“So could you at least pull off the motion?” asked Naomasa.

The two other prosthetic arm girls turned toward her and slapped the palms

of their prosthetic arms on top of the fence.

“Judge, of course.”

They responded in unison, so Horizon applauded.

Both Gin and Narumi’s faces were a light shade of red, Gin cleared her throat, and Narumi walked through the arch with the half-dragon. Then Narumi looked away from the group and toward the back of the café.

“The Vicereine used to live back here?”

“Ohh, are you interested too, Uqui Wife?” said the idiot while he fixed the summer uniform’s chest band.

Hearing that, the others exchanged a glance and Horizon nodded.

“I see,” she said. “It would seem I need to go first. ...Let us finish this quickly. We need time for the meeting later.”

Asama approached, so Horizon returned the teacup, stood up, and slapped her belly.

“Okay, I’m ready to go now.”

Naomasa felt like she had not been in the back of the Aoi home for quite a while.

They walked into the kitchen and she took a peek at how someone else lived in their home.

...The last time I was here was to work on the plumbing, wasn’t it?

That had been in middle school and she had changed the height of the kitchen sink.

“Toori said he wanted to use this place to run a café.”

The sink had been set at the average height for a woman, so he had had it raised a bit.

That had required lengthening the water pipe, but there had been a problem.

...By starting back up the main café, he had to use a lot more water for the

cooking.

Registering as a business could get approval for a lot of that, but he was not going to run the café to that extent.

That was why Naomasa had added a water purification tank out back to recycle the drain water. However...

“Well, it’s a pretty unique building.”

“It’s hard to tell when you live here,” said the crossdresser as he looked back from the hallway in the back of the kitchen.

When he saw everyone was following, he pointed around from the ceiling.

“It’s made by England’s IZUMO, right?”

“Judge. Probably because it was meant to be a bakery. The connection units are standard, but the space between them and the units of measurement are different. That’s why the water purification tank had to be installed above ground and why I thought I was going crazy while working on it. ...It all made sense once I checked the registration information, though.”

“Hmm,” said the others as they looked around the hallway and kitchen.

Then the crossdresser smiled bitterly.

“Hey, hey. There’s nothing hidden around here other than porn games.”

“Anyway, Toori-sama, to get back on topic: I used to live here?”

“Right, right. You moved her after your mom passed away.”

“How long did I live here?”

“About three years, I think?”

“No,” said Asama. “It was two years and five months. Sorry for the unnecessary detail.”

...Asama-chi sure is caring.

Naomasa smiled bitterly at her friend’s concern.

The idiot would die if he felt sorrow.

So even though he was estimating, Asama had stopped the idiot from making

things worse by rounding up the time they spent together. And by correcting him, she could also show the idiot that she too knew this.

She really is a caring girl, thought Naomasa, but then Asama suddenly stepped forward with her eyebrows somewhat raised.

“Ah! Wait. Excuse me a moment.”

“Huh? What is it, Asama?”

“Um, sorry, but I need to visit Kimi’s room.”

“Oh!? Are you interested in my bed!? You are, aren’t you!? Then you can go warm it up for me! But make sure you don’t get boob prints in it! Or O-Prints^[2] as I like to call them!”

“Sis, wouldn’t Pai-Prints be clearer?”

“Heh heh heh. Foolish brother? That precedent would mean dick prints have the nonsensical abbreviation of Ck-Prints. So to make sure we end up with D-Prints, it has to be O-Prints here. See? The rules put dicks first!”

Asama ignored all of that, pushed aside the curtain to Kimi’s room, and stepped inside. And immediately...

“Ah! Kimi, you arranged my clothes in a human shape doing a ‘suuuuun!’ pose! We’re not an Amaterasu shrine, so please don’t do that!”

What kind of pose is that? wondered Naomasa as the idiot pointed further down the hallway.

“The room next to sis’s and mine is the one Horizon used to live in.”

“I see,” said one of the people standing alongside Naomasa: Horizon. “Why did you not reveal this information earlier?”

“Hmm. I think you’ll understand once you see it. Masa, Asama, you come too.”

“Oh, yes! Wait just a moment!”

Asama must have been rushing because she came out while holding a summer uniform shirt. When Naomasa and the others followed the idiot, they soon reached the end of the hallway.

Next to their rooms on the left was the entrance to the room that used to be Horizon's.

The bath and bathroom were on the other side.

So they looked to the left.

"Toori-sama, can you open it?"

"Judge, take a look."

The idiot opened the door to show the girls who had followed him.

Suzu sensed what was beyond the opened door.

...*Wow*.

The wind moved and the sound spread out.

The way her ears sensed the scene, it was like an empty space had suddenly appeared on the left side of the hallway.

But there was a back end to that space.

The sounds made by everyone's breaths and movements reflected off of that, so the inside of the space was revealed to her like she was reaching out and feeling it.

The reverberating sounds came from just inside. But even if there was an obstacle, she could circle behind it.

...*Umm*.

There were walls, a ceiling, and a floor. By understanding that, the state of things inside was rapidly revealed to her.

But after checking through some of it, Suzu said the same thing as someone else: Mitotsudaira.

"Eh...?"

They both expressed confusion.

Horizon had lived in that room. That was what they had been told, but once the door was opened, they found something there.

“...Luggage?”

The room had been cleaned up and the futon and such were piled up in the back.

No matter how she perceived it, there was only one way to describe it.

“This is a...guest room...”

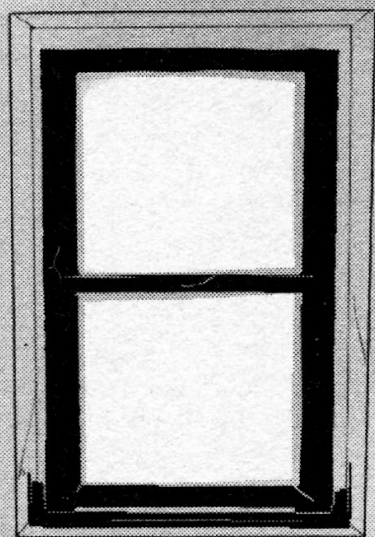
It was no longer Horizon’s room.

Chapter 31: Guests in the Living Room

第三十一章

『居間の客人達』

かつてあったもの
今は無いもの
その理由
配点 (距離)



What once was

What is no more

The reason why

Point Allocation (Distance)

“Heh heh. That’s right.”

Horizon heard Kimi’s voice.

“When Horizon and my foolish brother were taken away, everything in the room was taken to Lord Motonobu. When my foolish brother later returned, we discussed what to do with this room and never could make a decision.”

“I see,” replied Horizon.

She had no memory of the dimly-lit room, but the version of herself that had lived here had been lost ten years before. In that case...

“Leaving the room empty is wasteful for life on the Musashi.”

“You can be mad if you want. Now, hit him! Hit him, Horizon!”

Kimi held the idiot under her right arm and stuck the idiot’s butt out toward Horizon.

He initially shook his butt as if in protest, but...

“No, foolish brother! You need to stick your butt out for ten years’ worth of punishment! And flip!”

When Kimi flipped up the summer uniform’s skirt, the crossdresser seemed to gather his resolve.

“Okay, Horizon! Let’s settle this once and for all!” The idiot stuck his butt out. “Now! Bring it oooooooooon!!”

Horizon borrowed Tonbo Spare from Futayo and gently stuck the blade into his butt.

“Ah, wait, you really like this gag recently, don’t you? No, no! You’re gonna make my butt crack even deeper!”

“Nooo!” protested Tonbo Spare.

“Keep at it, Tonbo Spare!” said Futayo. “Just have a little more patience!”

Horizon looked to Kimi, ignoring the crossdresser’s butt.

“Kimi-sama.”

“Heh heh. What is it, Horizon? Are you going to stick Lype Katathlipse between my boobs!? Are you!?”

“Doing that would only bring sorrow to Adele-sama, so please be undershtanding.”

“I was expecting something awful, but did you have to attack from multiple angles at once!?”

Adele received a thumbs up for her trouble.

“But,” said Horizon. “There is something I understand now that I have seen this room.”

That being...

“Since I have no memory of the room, I am not sure what to make of the fact that it used to be mine...”

...Yeah...

Mitotsudaira saw an awkward sweat on Horizon’s face as she turned toward Kimi.

Horizon raised her right forearm.

“Um, Kimi-sama, would it be best if I remembered some of my lost memories or found some memento of the past?”

“Hmm, that probably isn’t possible, so maybe not...”

“And I really don’t think you should be feeling any responsibility here, Horizon,” added Mitotsudaira.

“Judge, I am aware of that. Because someone here said he would take all the responsibility onto himself.”

Horizon gently pushed Lype Katathlipse into the idiot's butt.

"Ah, wait, a second one!? That's new, isn't it!?"

My king, bear with it.

While Mitotsudaira watched over her king's efforts, Yoshiyasu found something at the bottom of the wall.

"Hey, it looks like a hole in the wall was repaired over here."

"Hm?" Tenzou crouched down to check. "Could this be linked to a memory of young Horizon-dono damaging the wall!? ...Yes, from the looks of it, an arrow was fired in from the neighboring room!"

Everyone turned toward Asama and the shrine maiden was already hanging her head and raising her right forearm.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. But you know how you really want to shoot a new bow when you get it, right? Well, I set up an unwanted magazine as a target to test it out and its penetrative power was quite impressive."

"In other words, you did this, Tomo?"

Asama raised both hands with her head hanging.

Kimi nodded once as well.

"But before that, we had already changed the wallpaper to make it a guest room."

Mitotsudaira heard someone say, "I see."

It was Horizon and she took a breath.

"Regardless, I used to live here, correct?"

"Heh heh. That's right. So what will you do now?" Kimi aimed the king's butt toward Horizon while holding him below her arm like a drum. "You've moved to our house, so we will give you this room again. But we are not returning it to you or reverting to the way things were. After all, you really were lost and that really did inspire remorse. ...We are giving this place to you in order to start anew."

"Judge. I can tell that you cared for me." Horizon looked through the dimly-lit

room. “Musashi has limited space. If you were running a café, you could have chosen to use this for storage. And yet you made it into a guest room.”

“Why do you think that is?”

“Good question,” said Horizon as she turned toward Mitotsudaira and Asama.

...Eh?

Just as confusion reached Mitotsudaira’s mind, Horizon placed a hand on her chin and spoke.

“I have determined all of you intended to renew yourselves and that is exactly what you did. Meaning...”

Meaning...

“You likely planned to use this room once you gained a new family member.”

Mitotsudaira of course understood what Horizon meant.

...She’s talking about someone “joining” the family.

Horizon looked to Kimi.

“Kimi-sama.”

Horizon adjusted the position of the two blades sticking into the king’s butt.

“Are you listening?”

“Wh-what was the point of that extra action, Horizon!?” asked Mitotsudaira.

“They were about to fall out and that was bothering me.” Horizon placed a hand on her chin and viewed the two inserted blades like she was assessing a flower arrangement. “Well, that should do. Now, Kimi-sama.”

“What is it?”

“You have done enough. It is a fact that I lived here in the past. But even if you claim it was used as a guest room in anticipation of making a new family member...it shows no sign of use. I can chalk that up to that boy being unpopular, but...”

Horizon slightly adjusted Tonbo Spare’s angle.

“Sharp angle...” said the weapon.

“Bear with it, Tonbo Whatever. ...Anyway, even if you and Toori-sama were focused on heading in a new direction, it can still be seen as a type of regret if it never leads to any real results. ...I believe we settled some things at Mikawa, so I would like to begin a new system.”

Mitotsudaira realized something as she listened to Horizon.

...It connects back to my king's remorse.

This was why he had carried remorse even as he faced forward and pulled everyone else along with him.

It seemed contradictory, but...

...To him, was that the Final Horizon?

Mitotsudaira looked through the room.

Horizon's scent was not to be found there. Accurate or not, Mitotsudaira remembered her old scent as being “peony-scented hair”, but now she could only sense the “camellia-scented hair” of her king and Kimi.

Any possible memento had been retrieved by Lord Motonobu, so for her king, it must have felt like Horizon had entirely disappeared.

Horizon's father had placed the memorial stone on Remorse Way to declare that chapter of their lives over, but...

...Yes.

Walking that “way” and arriving in front of the memorial stone would have meant she really was gone.

However.

However, that king had understood the truth. The issue had been accepting that truth.

“My king,” said Mitotsudaira. “If you had thought Horizon was ‘still with us’, you would have kept this room closed, wouldn't you have?”

But she had been “gone”.

He had understood that, so he had tried to face forward by hoping for someone new.

...I understood all this, you know?

When the Logismo Oplo had been distributed to the nations, he had made a suggestion that they gather them so they could hold a memorial service. It had sounded like a joke, but it had held important meaning for them.

That was likely why her king had planned to descend to the mainland after graduation.

Thinking back to Mikawa, her king had initially descended the school stairs on his own after the special student general assembly.

He had not wanted to trouble his friends with his own problems, so he had likely planned to go it alone and search for someone new.

That may have been why Asama had revealed a plan of her own back then: “I’m thinking of going around the mainland to investigate mysterious phenomenon after graduation.”

Half of it was a lie and the other half was also a lie.

So Mitotsudaira had said something as well.

“Did you know a Testament footnote about Mito Mitsukuni says he went on a tour of the Far East?”

But all that had changed when Horizon arrived.

The king was no longer choosing to go it alone.

...That’s right.

He had decided in Oushuu that he would go with all of them. So he had settled on something in his heart.

He would not go it alone and search for someone new.

He would go with all of them and recognize what was important to him.

...Wow...!

I’m interpreting this way too far in my favor!

Mitotsudaira wanted to put her hands on her cheeks and wiggle around like her mother, but she had to resist.

“My king.”

Her king had chosen to accept everything, including a new Horizon. So...

“You decided to stay here, didn’t you?”

He no longer had to feel regret, forget, or run away.

Everyone was here and he had chosen everyone.

And they would let him do that. Which meant...

“I am here too, my king.”

Suzu sensed something in Mitotsudaira’s voice.

It was a bell.

Her voice contained a resolute ring of joy and expectation that was best described as a bell, just like Suzu’s own name.

Not even Suzu produced a ring like that very often, but her friend was producing it here.

...Wow.

Suzu had thought Mitotsudaira usually acted based on reason rather than excitement. Perhaps due to her past, she tended to restrain herself.

But it was amazing when her excitement surpassed that restraint. Amazing enough to concern Suzu somewhat.

...Huh? Th-this might be what you call an excitable person.

But it’s not a bad thing, so that’s fine, isn’t it? Suzu asked to no one.

Regardless, Suzu thought that balance between excitement and restraint was what it meant to be a knight.

Mitotsudaira would restrain and store up her desire to go on a rampage or enjoy herself. And that discipline allowed her to ask something now: “My king, what will you do with this room?”

How nice, thought Suzu.

Mitotsudaira-san is so cool when she's with Toori-kun. She doesn't try to keep up appearances and allows her true self out, which is really cool.

Also, it's incredible that she can stay positive and face the issue at hand when Toori-kun has two blades sticking into him.

...Toori-kun has begun a new system.

Or as he would put it, he was not going to run away any longer.

And Horizon had said she wanted a new system.

That may have been because she was unsure how to react to elements of her past she had no memory of.

Besides, the two of them had faced their past and swept their relationship clean at Mikawa.

That may have been why Horizon moved now.

She faced everyone, gently fixed the position of the two blades, and nodded.

"Listen."

She slapped the butt Kimi held.

"Ahn! H-Horizon, what's this? Trying to make me more sensitive?"

"Someone shut up this unsightly boy."

Horizon muttered something about "a third one" and began to look around, so Suzu and the others ducked low to wait it out.

"Um," said Mary from behind Suzu.

"Stick Excalibur in there and Elizabeth-dono will probably complain," said Tenzou.

"Yeah, I would really prefer to avoid an unprecedented international incident triggered by sticking Excalibur in someone's butt," said Masazumi.

"...Then Narumi."

"...Eh? No, I don't think so."

She was fast.

But Horizon seemed to have concluded there were no available weapons.

“Fine then. How should I put this? I do not know if this boy is shy or just thoughtless, but while he is constantly saying more than necessary, he tends not to say the important things.”

Horizon faced Asama and Mitotsudaira. And then Tenzou and Masazumi.

...Ah.

Horizon understood.

She understood that those important things would reach some people even if they were left unsaid. And she understood that everyone here was that kind of person.

So she faced all of them in turn and finally took a breath.

“I have determined there is no need to confirm this with all of you. We began this before Mikawa, announced it at Mikawa, reached an agreement on it in Oushuu, and prepared ourselves for it in Sanada.”

“But,” said Mitotsudaira. “In both the past and the present, we shared in my king’s secret here.”

Mal-Ga: “Oh, sorry. I’m busy drawing Mitotsudaira’s secret place, so I’m not actually there yet. But I can hear it all, so it works out.”

Gold Mar: “Hmm. Should you really be drawing their guest room based only on your imagination, Ga-chan?”

Silver Wolf: “What are you doing!?”

Bell: “M-Mitotsudaira-san...restraint...restraint.”

But Mitotsudaira was right.

There is proof here that Toori-kun has been thinking about so many things.

Kimi-chan and Toori-kun’s mom are probably the only ones who knew.

But since he had shown it to everyone and opened it up...

“Hm...”

Suzu heard a quiet voice.

It was Asama's. Suzu could tell she was gently holding her own body which had a slightly elevated temperature. That voice had been one of confusion but also one she had wanted to hear herself.

She was agreeing to accept this despite her hesitation.

And in front of them, Horizon said more.

"Let us remake this into something new today." Horizon once more faced Mitotsudaira and Asama. "This room is too small, isn't it? I understand now why Toori-sama called for Naomasa-sama. ...Naomasa-sama, are you ready?"

"Judge. You want me to remove the wall that separates this from Kimi's room, right?"

...Eh?

Suzu reached out and touched the wall.

"You can...remove it?"

"Yes. Like I said before, I saw the general structure a while back," said Naomasa. "If you remove the stopper on the hallway side and pull out the unit, you can remove it barehanded. My prosthetic arm would be best for carrying it around, though."

That was incredible.

...We don't have walls at home, so I didn't know that...

Flat Vassal: "Having multiple rooms at all is pretty incredible."

Bell: "B-but that's because...you live alone...Adele."

Marube-ya: "Suzu, you live with your parents, so how do you deal with the one room?"

Bell: "Nn. We use a curtain...to partition off the area below the loft. ...I wanted the top, but mom and dad...said it was dangerous. They treat me like a child, but, um...is it more childish...to want to be on the top?"

Gold Mar: "I feel like everyone in our class – Ga-chan and me included – like to climb or fly as high as we can."

Unturning: “Are you saying all of you are id-...why are all of you silencing each other with those looks?”

Worshiper: “I feel like it would be hard to find someone who has never climbed up that high. Oh, but I’m safe. I always work underground.”

Novice: “Ohiroshiki-kun, that doesn’t mean you’re working for the underworld, does it?”

Suzu did not really understand, but her stance was apparently better than digging down belowground.

But then Mitotsudaira moved. She placed her hand on the wall to the left.

“If you remove this wall...won’t that effectively make my king’s, Kimi’s, and this room into a single space?”

“Judge,” confirmed Horizon while slapping the butt once. “This will cease to be a guest room. And even if a large number of people move in here, we can divide it up with as many walls as necessary. ...We only need to make a decision based on the number of people and whether they will use a bed or a futon.”

“Then should I remove it now?” asked Naomasa.

“Ah! Wait just a moment!” Asama raised her voice. “Mito’s parents are visiting today, so wouldn’t it be best to have a guest room?”

...That’s true!!

Mitotsudaira felt her face grow pale when she remembered that fact.

And Asama’s solution was indeed the best. If her parents were confined to the guest room and a voice stealth barrier was put in place, it would seem like they had settled down until the following morning. What was happening inside was a different matter.

“Tomo, that is a great idea! Today can be the last day for the guest room!”

“Heh heh heh. Okay, Naomasa, remove that wall.”

“Kimi! Kimi! You’re just choosing what you think will be funnier, aren’t you!?”

“Heh heh. Oh, come on, Mitotsudaira. Funnier? Not even I would ask for

something so cruel. I just really want to see what happens!!”

“That’s even worse!”



Just as Mitotsudaira yelled that, Narumi tilted her head and raised her right forearm.

Everyone gave her a questioning look, so the Date Vice Chancellor opened her mouth.

“Is the Mito Lord marrying into the Aoi family?”

Mal-Ga: “Direct! Now that’s a direct question! Argh, I hate that I didn’t go with that for my summer event manuscript! Margot...!”

Gold Mar: “There, there, Ga-chan. Once you’re done hugging me, you need to continue inking it.”

Scarred: “Umm, uh, I am not quite sure what is going on. Could you explain it for me, Master Tenzou?”

10ZO: “Um, Mitotsudaira-dono? I would like to explain this without angering you, so are there any dangerous words I should avoid?”

Silver Wolf: “This is worse than I thought!!”

Righteousness: “Hey, I’m on my way there, but Mito is near Satomi, so I would like to hear about anything that could lead to a major change there.”

Mitotsudaira was unsure what to say.

She could not deny that things were headed in the direction of marriage. There were a variety of paths this could take, but if she and her king continued to desire each other, that would be what happened.

And she had a feeling that Horizon would be in charge.

After all, Mitotsudaira was a knight who granted her king’s wishes and she had bound that master/servant relationship with him. And with that king as their leader, Musashi wished for world domination and the return of Horizon’s emotions.

On that point, she and her king formed a team with a shared objective.

In other words...

“I will join his battle formation.”

Adele reacted to Mitotsudaira’s words.

She exchanged a glance with the others.

Then they all took a breath and faced Mitotsudaira.

“Join his wives...!?”^[3]

Mitotsudaira leaned back from their simultaneous question.

She had not expected such a powerful reaction.

And someone took a step toward her: Neshinbara.

He pushed his glasses up his nose.

“This is important, so allow me to confirm something.”

“Wh-what is it?”

“Mitotsudaira-kun, you are saying you will join as part of your king’s wives?”

Mitotsudaira frowned at that like she was confused why he was asking.

“That is what I have intended for a long time. Of course I do.”

Mitotsudaira heard everyone explode.

“Seriously!?”

...*Eh?*

No, she was talking about her position in the formation as his knight.

So she could not falter here. She placed a hand on her chest and stated her intentions.

“Yes. ...I will join my king’s battle formation to work hard as a knight from as close to him as possible.”

She had said it.

And everyone immediately put on serious expressions.

...Eh?

The silence only lasted a moment.

Horizon had walked up next to her at some point and she placed a hand on her shoulder.

Horizon expressionlessly raised her left palm to tell the others to wait.

She then spoke while sweating.

“That was an impressive announcement. Thank you very much, Mitotsudaira-sama. If you have come here with that kind of resolve, then I must prepare some things for you.”

“N-no, um, is it that impressive to say I am joining his battle formation?”

“She said it again!” said the others while tilting their heads. But Horizon...

“To be honest, I can be indifferent to such things, so if you work hard, I am not confident I will be able to stop your carnivorous feast. But fine.”

“Uh, you are talking about my battles, aren’t you?”

Everyone pulled back a bit.

And after a moment, they began whispering to each other.

“So she really does see it as a battle.”

“Wouldn’t it be predation more than anything?”

“I’m worried for Aoi-kun, but, well, this will probably keep him safe too.”

What were they talking about? But while she started to feel a little uneasy, Mitotsudaira tried asking something.

She turned toward Asama.

“Um, Tomo, you’re going to join the formation too, aren’t you?”

Asama saw everyone turn her way.

...Ehh!?

Mito, you didn’t have to ask it like that!! she thought, but it was too late now.

Making a sudden concubine announcement here seemed like a bit much to her.

But among the eyes focused on her...

...Mito?

There was an odd atmosphere around Mitotsudaira. She was tilting her head like she did not understand the situation or suspected she had made some kind of misunderstanding.

So Asama thought back over what had happened, trying to find anything someone could have mistaken. And...

“—————”

...Ahhhhh!!!!

She figured it out.

It was not wives. It was not that at all.

...She meant battle formation, didn't she!?

Her vision briefly went dark.

It had to be that. There was no doubting it. From yesterday to today, Asama's blood had been rising to and draining from her face more often than any other time in her life.

This time, it was fully draining. But a moment later...

...Wow...!

Heat rose from her neck and steamy sweat followed.

She could not believe it.

How was she supposed to respond? She was the only one who had been asked this question while aware it meant “wives”.

Mito had meant it as “battle formation”, so only Asama was being pressed for an answer under the assumption that it was “wives”.

So...

“U-umm.”

She had only just told him she would eventually say it for herself.

She wanted to hide and protect that shared secret.

But she knew something about her friend.

...I bet Mito would have answered even if she knew it meant “wives”.

But when she realized in front of everyone here that there had been a misunderstanding, Mitotsudaira would feel like she had been boasting about it as “wives”.

So Asama took a step forward to secretly inform Mitotsudaira.

“Um, hey, Mito?”

...U-uhhh.

Asama was so bad at acting. But when she moved forward, she intentionally stumbled over the bump at the room’s entrance.

“Ah.”

She lost her balance.

And Mitotsudaira reflexively moved forward.

She supported Asama without saying a word, so Asama leaned against her shoulder and spoke into her ear.

“Why, thank you.”

The first thing Mitotsudaira noticed was the emphasis.

...Why?

Asama had placed an unnatural emphasis on that first word.

...What does that mean?”

She puzzled over that.

“Phew... I just tripped is all, Mito.”

This time, she emphasized the start of “phew”.

It may have been a coincidence, but then Asama’s blatant act would have

been meaningless.

So what was this riddle supposed to mean?

Mitotsudaira thought about it for a full two seconds.

...Ahhhh!!!!

I will be working hard at that!? was her first thought. The word “predation” also came to mind, but she set that aside because it was too much like her mother.

That said, her misunderstanding was the problem here. Her stance as a knight was correct, but if she had gotten away from that...

...My king, I’m sorry!!!

She made ten prostrations in her heart, but when she raised her head in her imagination, he had two blades in his butt and she figured that meant he had forgiven her.

But Asama moved away and fanned her collar between Mitotsudaira and the others. She was looking a bit up toward the ceiling and she likely thought she had pulled off her performance without anyone suspecting.

Mitotsudaira wanted to make a *tsukkomi* about that, but Asama had saved her by pointing out her misunderstanding.

“...Yes.”

That’s right, she thought. She was prepared on the “wife” side of things too.

So she decided to say something to help out her friend. She would make her misunderstanding into the truth.

“Well, I suppose that is not even worth asking. I know Tomo is sure to join.”

Join what?

“Coming together as wives is sure to be fun.”

And just as she said that...

“Well said, Nate! You win the Perfect Score Maman Award!”

A bombshell landed behind the others.

“Why are you here so soon after I drove you away!?”

Mitotsudaira could tell that something was beyond saving. Her mother smiled and nodded at the densely-packed group as she walked through them.

Scarily enough, she somehow managed to avoid letting her shoulders, chest, or even hair touch any of them.

What was the trick to that? Some kind of martial arts?

But as Mitotsudaira tried to figure it out, her mother supported dazed Asama’s shoulders from behind.

“Nate! So this flat-chested girl is the one you’re competing against!? Make sure you give it your all!”

“Stop judging everyone based on your standards!”

“Ah! Nate Maman! Wait just a second, okay!?”

The two-bladed one got up. But since Kimi was holding him under an arm, he just bent backwards with his legs in the air. That may have been why Kimi smiled a little.

“Foolish brother? Do you want me to spin you around?”

“Please do, sis!”

“If you insist.”

Kimi rotated the king vertically. She actually twisted around the arm holding him while passing below her own arm. It was a lot like a children’s dance.

And the king’s body made two vertical rotations. Once Kimi had spun around so their positions were reversed, the king was standing facing Mitotsudaira and her mother.

The crossdresser stood up. When the two blades fell from his butt, he caught them between his thighs so they pointed upwards.

“Hey, Nate Maman.”

“My king, is that any way to behave while speaking with someone?”

“Yeah, but I’m pretty easy-going.”

“I can’t exactly argue with that...”

“Try harder!” shouted someone behind her, but some things were just not possible.

At any rate, her king looked to her mother. It was impressive how he made a point of staring at her chest before reaching her face.

“Um, what will you do? Will you stay in our guest room?”

“Good question,” said her mother with a hand to her mouth. Mitotsudaira silently responded to that.

...Accept! Accept the offer, mother! Just say ‘testament’ and it will all be so much easier!

She watched as her mother nodded and replied.

“Based on what that princess was saying, I think you should remove this wall. ...You mustn’t use us staying over as an excuse to fix this as a guest room.”

Mitotsudaira had not expected that from the woman.

“Mother... You can actually take things seriously?”

“Oh, Nate. I’m always serious. And Mr. King? If you can give us another room to use, it would be best if it is soundproofed.”

“Mother! You’re cutting to the heart of the issue a little too quickly!”

“Listen, Nate. Staying at someone’s house is an important situation to use.”

“You can’t fool me by saying it with a serious expression.”

But Asama had already begun using a sign frame to set up the barrier. Perhaps as thanks for earlier.

One thing still worried Mitotsudaira.

“Um, where is father?”

“Testament. He is currently at the diplomatic building. He is resting until the meeting is over.”

“Is father not feeling well?”

“Testament. We just spent a night apart, if you recall. So when we met in the diplomatic building earlier, the loneliness suddenly hit and we did some studying together...led by me.”

“Th-that is an odd way of phrasing that!”

“Now, now.” Her mother smiled with her hands still on Asama’s shoulders. “You all will be much the same before long.”

Mitotsudaira was curious about the “all”, but she knew it was better not to ask. The damage would only spread.

There was something else she had to ask now.

“Mother...are you here for the meeting?”

“No, I thought I could get something to eat first.”

This woman...! thought Mitotsudaira from the bottom of her heart, but her mother only smiled and spoke.

“But Terumoto and Ujinao will be here soon. Let’s enjoy the meeting just as the food is ready. ...We can eat while we fight over the preparations for tomorrow’s Siege of Odawara and Siege of Bitchu Takamatsu Castle.”

Chapter 32: Conquerors Below the Clouds

第三十二章

『雲下の天下人達』

聞こえているか
聞こえているだろう
誰にだって
配点 (男なりやこそ)

Can you hear it?

You can, can't you?

Everyone can

Point Allocation (Especially Men)

A loud rumbling roared across the wheat fields and waterways.

The sound came from ultra-heavyweight objects being periodically driven into the ground.

In every direction below the summer sun, the breakwaters meant to flood Paris were under construction.

But the battle over that flooding would begin the following day, so...

“Hurry!”

That word came from every part of the worksite and the movements followed that instruction. Everyone was busy transporting or positioning materials while keeping a watchful eye on Paris and the giant forms of the dragons protecting its perimeter.

Transport ships flew back and forth between the worksite and the Azuchi to the south, so mountains of materials had formed around Paris.

Everyone was carrying the gathered materials to their appropriate locations around the city.

But the people were not transporting or positioning those materials without any assistance.

Most of the workers either wore mobile shells or had strengthened their bodies with spell charms.

A single human could carry a 10-square-meter steel panel and they erected them on the earth as a group.

When performing that kind of work, their footing was important. They lacked the power to use weight lightening or distribution spells, so...

“Lay out the breakwater armor panels on the ground!”

The armor panels that would be erected as breakwaters were used to pave a path between the pile of materials and the worksite.

And once the armor road had reached the appropriate location, it would be removed starting from the pile of materials end and carried forward.

By repeating that process, they could maintain a stable work environment.

But even if they could carry and erect them, driving them into the ground was difficult.

Mobile shells and spell charm strengthening could raise an individual's strength, but there was one thing it could not give them: height.

It was rare for a mobile shell to stand taller than 3 meters when worn.

That was not tall enough to drive in the 5m panels.

M.H.R.R. and P.A. Oda did not have much in the way of god of war forces.

Work in elevated locations was difficult.

So in those cases...

“Hey, what are you going to do now?”

One of the dragons surrounding Paris asked them that while sitting in a trench with his hind legs sprawled out.

He was more than 100 meters long, so he could cover the few kilometers to the construction site in no time at all. Thanks to the sharp hearing of dragons, he only had to call out to them to establish a conversation.

He placed his elbow on his knee to support the head at the end of his long neck.

“Want some help?”

“Huh!? Are you mocking us!? No, we don't need any help!”

The workers turned toward him.

They had ropes tied to the erected metal panel. Those would make sure it was not tilted when it was driven in from above.

Driving it in was the only step left. How was a mystery, but they apparently intended to do it somehow.

The dragon let out a deep breath through his nose as he watched.

“You say you don’t need any help, but what are you going to do? You’re too tiny to do it.”

“There are a couple of ways of handling this! Just watch!”

“If you say so.”

The dragon waved over to another dragon protecting the city from a different direction.

“Hey, they say they’re gonna show us something.”

“Show us what?”

A few of the dragons looked to the northeast of Paris.

A metal wall had been erected there, but the bottom was not yet driven into the ground.

“Here are some provisions.”

A dragon from the north arrived with a large water barrel full of wine.

“Take this seriously!” shouted the dragons to the east and southeast, but the other four ignored them and sat down in a northeast trench.

Even the Paris workers who were constructing trenches or reinforcing walls took a break to watch.

Then the first dragon spoke to the M.H.R.R. workers while drinking wine.

“So how about you show us what you can do?”

“You drink alcohol!?”

“Dragons love alcohol. There are plenty of legends to that end, aren’t there? Even the Far East has one about a giant Hydra getting drunk and then decapitated.”

“Yeah, the one with Susanoo.”

The M.H.R.R. group gave a nod of understanding. Then one of them yelled

over from the distance.

“Then come join us! Our beer is delicious!”

The Paris group responded to that:

“It’s not that your beer is delicious; it’s that beer is all you have! No one wants to drink that black soup and go ‘pwah’!”

“Come to think of it, your coffee, forest, and clothes are all black. Are you obsessed with the color black!?”

“That’s right! We’ve got wine! That comes in red and white! And it tastes great!”

“Huhh!?” said the M.H.R.R. side as their mobile shells stepped forward.

The mobile shells were made by the Holy Knights Ironworks Guild, the representative corporation of the M.H.R.R. Catholics. They were colored white, so...

“Check out this white.”

Then the normal students in summer uniforms lined up alongside them.

Those uniforms were black, so white and black were lined up side by side.

The leader of the mobile shells gestured toward the two rows.

“Café au lait.”

Then he pulled out the assault spear attached to his back.

“So which idiot was it that said our nation is nothing but black!? Show yourself!”

The Elbe River was located east of the walled city of Magdeburg.

Tomoe Gozen stood on a pier over that river as she listened to a *lernen figur* relaying the situation in Hexagone Française.

She had been fishing and was about to return to the city.

“All black is more of a Protestant thing. The Catholics are actually quite fond of flashy colors.”

She raised the basket that held her catches.

It was a brown wicker basket, but even the sleeves of her summer uniform were black.

After confirming her color, she opened a new *lernen figur*.

“Hey, Guericke. Do you remember what color Eisen Ritter’s mobile shells are?”

“Testament. Protestants always go for a sincere black! That understated charm is so cool, isn’t it!? In other words...”

Tomoe Gozen broke the *lernen figur* with the hand holding her fishing rod.

After a sigh, she lowered her gaze from the pier to the surface of the Elbe.

“Well, from the Protestant perspective, perhaps it’s fine to see M.H.R.R. as overall black.”

In the summer sun, the water reflected her in her summer uniform standing on the newly-built pier.

The ether flare of a ghost created a halo, but her uniform and hair were black.

“I used to wear red to match my husband. ...But these aren’t meant to be mourning clothes, so once the Thirty Years’ War is over, maybe it will be time for the Protestants to take on a new look.”

Voices flew back and forth between Paris and the embankments beginning to surround the city.

First, from the Paris side:

“Hey! M.H.R.R.! Don’t be growing barley and making tons of beer just because it’s too cold to grow wheat! Beer instead of bread!? Are you beef cattle or something!?”

M.H.R.R. soon replied: “Don’t be stupid! Think of it as a new form of food! Besides, you’re always chugging tons of wine! And if you look at the wine cellar sites, they always show young girls stepping on the grapes in the wine barrels, but I bet it’s really barefoot fat old men singing a chanson and laughing about it

being 'purple roe'!"

"We don't do that!"

One of the dragons sighed while drinking from a large barrel of wine.

"Humans, this is pathetic..."

"Hey, M.H.R.R.! Did you hear what he said about you!?"

"He meant you too, Hexagone Française!!"

"So are you ever going to drive in that breakwater piece?" asked the dragon.

The M.H.R.R. group exchanged a glance.

And then...

"We're ready to go! Just look overhead!"

They pointed up where a transport ship floated. It was one of the ones that had been transporting materials earlier.

The deck of the ship directly above the M.H.R.R. forces was visible from Paris.

It was a flat transport ship and its long metal deck was loaded with something other than materials.

It was human silhouettes. And...

"What are those heavyweight things...!?"

Heavyweight mobile shells had been carried up to an altitude of approximately 2km, close to the upper limit for an M.H.R.R. transport ship.

They were 3m tall, but they were not heavyweight because of their thick armor or their movement support system that prioritized durability over mobility.

"Hey! How unhealthy are the people wearing those!?"

"They are not unhealthy!" shouted the M.H.R.R. leader. "They just ended up that way after living a proper M.H.R.R. life of drinking beer and eating eisbein and sausage every day!"

"That's the same thing!"

“Don’t be stupid! Not one of them has slacked off in their training as mercenaries! ...Do you understand what that means!?”

The Paris group gasped when they heard that.

“You don’t mean...”

They were going to do it.

“Exactly.”

Then the M.H.R.R. leader opened a *lernen figur*.

“Captain! We’re ready down here! Send the others in!”

A sound came from the *lernen figur*.

It came from the sky.

The sound of striking metal rang from the deck floating in the heavens.

It was the sound of the men standing on the transport ship leaping in unison.

They were clearly flying through the air.

They had jumped off of the ship.

“Oh.”

Everyone looked up as that group fell.

The ultra-heavyweight mobile shells slowly changed their stance in midair so their heads were aimed down.

“Open spell catapult for directional instructions.”

A voice spoke from the M.H.R.R. *lernen figur* that had been sent into the sky.

“This is M.H.R.R. Hashiba Mobile Shell Battalion’s Charging Company ‘Schau Essen’. We will drive those in.”

The captain wearing a thick mobile shell thought to himself in the air.

...So it is finally time for me to be useful.

People had different body types.

He had tried to eat and train the same as everyone else, but once he reached his thirties, things had started getting fairly bad. Especially around the stomach.

He had started to think it was time to leave the front line.

But times were always on the move. M.H.R.R. was spreading its battlefields on all fronts, so everyone had to continue working.

At times, that meant attacking. At times, it meant defending.

At times, it meant fighting other nations. At times, it meant fighting the Protestants of their own nation.

And at times, it meant acting as a Far Eastern group. This was one of those times.

There was always time to fight. That was true of M.H.R.R., of the Landsknechts, and of Hashiba.

During all that fighting, they needed someone to hold the battle line no matter what. That was the role of their mobile shell battalion.

But the constant fighting brought stress and there was only so much they could do to strengthen themselves.

They trained, ate, and rested.

...And sometimes play porn games...!

Needless to say, that kind of lifestyle had dangerous results. They had been in a dangerous position already, but that danger was apparent to anyone who saw them now.

I mean, Hashiba-sama is so damn good at securing supplies.

And as Catholics, they had to eat everything served to them.

As a result, a normal mobile shell was a tight fit for them.

But there was still a place for them on the battlefield.

“Klassisch Kunst: Weight of Life...activate!”

They were heavy.

The volume of a lifeform was its very existence. You could say their volume

was their quantity of life.

So by casting a Testament Kunst that valued life, their volume became a weapon.

Weight was the same.

“Indeed.”

It is not the size of our gut that is dangerous.

“Listen up, Landsknechts...!”

“Testament!”

The captain shouted to the others as they slowly began to fall.

“We are those with a greater quantity of life than your average person!”

“...We are those with a greater quantity of life than your average person!”

“We are those who use that life to fulfill our duty!”

“...We are those who use that life to fulfill our duty!”

He took a breath.

“So let us shout and eat our duty. ...Schau Essen!”

“Testament! ...Schau Essen!”

At the same time, several *lernen figurs* opened in the sky behind them.

The Testament Kunst provided acceleration and additional weight as they prepared themselves as gravitational hammers.

“...Prepare your arms!”

A weapon formed with the giant, upside-down mobile shells as the core.

They held their arms together as two Testament Kunst hammers that extended down much like a jaw.

They began their fall, but...

“Begin acceleration...!”

They launched themselves straight down.

The men traveled through the air. They dropped down to slam into the ground that was directly overhead for them.

They covered the 2km distance in just a few seconds.

But the men sang. And despite their tension and expectation, their trajectories did not so much as waver.

“...Today we want to march.”

They left their song in the air behind them.

“...To try out a new march.”

And their destination was...

“In the lovely Westerwald.”

The ground was so close now. The breakwater armor seemed close enough to reach out and touch.

“...Yes.”

They sang.

“There the wind whistles so cold...!”

And they scored direct hits.

On Paris’s wall, Henri heard the impact and saw the blast rising.

A stealth barrier already covered Paris, so the space between the city wall and the barrier was the only way to see outside.

She looked northeast where dust and smoke rose from a few points in the distance.

“...Humanity does some crazy things.”

Enemy mobile shells had made a powered descent from the sky to drive the armor panels into the ground.

Her *Belle de Marionnette* vision instantly processed the footage recorded at

high speed.

The image from just before the blast of impact showed that the Signe Classique hammers had been around a dozen meters long.

“Hey, Henri, did you measure their speed at about 100 meters up?”

“They did not break the sound barrier. ...But given enough power, they probably could.”

Henri briefly closed her eyes.

The armor panels they had driven into the ground were used for large aerial ships.

They were both big and thick.

Judging by eye, they appeared to be made from layers of metal and buffering about 70cm thick.

...The areas they hit were badly deformed.

The strikers had allowed their twin Signe Classique hammers to shatter. They had then used the scattering ether as cushioning for their landing.

They were not disposable.

After landing, the ultra-heavyweight mobile shells were running forward along with the P.A. Oda group that had been waiting further back.

“Yes! We did it, captain!”

“Testament! No one can call us the Shields of the Rear Guard any longer!”

Henri’s eyebrows rose at the voices she heard.

“Honestly. I thought it was odd to give away what they can do for a simple pile-driving job.”

“Were they showing us they have a force requiring our attention while also raising their overall morale?”

“It seems so. ...Tomorrow, we will have to worry about that kind of attack hitting Paris whenever a transport ship so much as approaches overhead.”

This will be trouble, she thought while seeing someone moving out of the

corner of her eye.

It was a dragon.

He nodded while drinking some wine and watching that performance.

“Humanity is a real pain in the ass.”

“Yes,” agreed another dragon. “We can’t afford to hold back tomorrow.”

“If they want to complete Musashino’s construction by tomorrow, they can’t hold back here.”

Yoshiyasu sighed at a Musashino teahouse.

It was a simple teahouse without any seats and it was located near the construction site for repairs.

She was on her way to the Main Blue Thunder. She had been going through some Satomi-related documents in the Student Council Room, so she was running later than the others.

The sun was already lowering in the west and the shadows were growing angled.

She was of course running a bit late for the gathering at the Main Blue Thunder. Even if this was about the Kantou Liberation, the main topic of discussion would be the Siege of Odawara, the Tensho Jingo Conflict, and the Siege of Bitchu Takamatsu Castle.

She was in no hurry. And...

...I want to avoid any actions I see as “rushed”.

After tomorrow’s battle brought them together with Mouri and Houjou, it would be time for the Keichou Campaign.

That was the Kantou Liberation.

It meant retaking Satomi. And...

“My sister...”

She did not have the courage to speak Yoshiyori’s name as well. However...

“Herrrrre y’go! Y’r ord’r’s r’dyyyyyyyyy!”

The teahouse’s maid cosplayer placed some shaved ice mixed with cream on the counter in front of her. It was inside a dried bamboo container, but she suspected it was cut out of the bamboo used for scaffolding.

At any rate, Yoshiyasu grabbed the spoon and scooped some of the frozen treat into her mouth.

Eating this below the teahouse’s overhang seemed like a nice summer break thing to do, but...

...It isn’t actually summer break yet.

They just barely still had classes left.

She looked inside the teahouse from below the eaves and saw a calendar on the wall which was clearly made from the scaffolding plywood. It was an Asama Shrine calendar. She checked the number visible next to an image of the Asama Shrine Representative praying in her shrine maiden outfit.

“July 29.”

Including today, they only had 3 days until July was over.

...We’ll be forced to start summer break once it’s August.

That meant the Kantou Liberation had to start tomorrow or the day after.

Even if the history recreation was given higher priority than school activities, they would have difficulty starting something during summer break. So...

“...We’re going to be busy, aren’t we?”

“You mean the Kantou Liberation?”

A voice reached her from the side.

She looked to the right and saw a girl below the eaves with several sign frames open.

She knew the girl. But only at the level that they knew what each other looked like.

“Satomi Student Council President Satomi Yoshiyasu. ...I am Musashi

Representative Committee Head Ookubo Nagayasu,” said the girl without turning Yoshiyasu’s way. “Before even getting to the Kantou Liberation, the Siege of Odawara is going to be a lot of trouble. ...So be prepared.”

“Okay, we can do this while we eat. Given how late it is already, I want to start the meeting during the meal.”

The colors of sunset dyed the sky to starboard.

The Main Blue Thunder was on the starboard side of the road, so its shadow gradually extended onto the road.

But Masazumi raised a glass of barley tea with her chest and below sinking into that shadow.

She was looking at a group of visitors.

“Mouri Terumoto. ...And Houjou Ujinao.”

But that was not all. Mouri had brought a group of automatons. Houjou had brought Ujiteru and...

“Who is that third person with you, Houjou Ujinao?”

There were two figures standing behind Ujinao.

One was Ujiteru the automaton. The other was a long-lived man.

Perhaps because it was summer, he wore a short-sleeved cloak with the hood up. His arms and face were quite wrinkled.

His bent hips were positioned fairly low and he looked Masazumi’s way from below the gray hair inside the hood.

Then he slowly opened his mouth and nodded.

“I am the Mechanical Phoenix Battalion Commander and Vice President of Houjou’s Odawara Academy. ...I am known as Houjou Genan.”

Once he said that, his mouth bent to the side.

He formed a smile.

“Heh heh... We are facing the Sieges of Odawara and of Bitchu Takamatsu

Castle. The plan is to determine how many days those battles will last and what either side stands to gain from each victory. But where's the fun in that?"

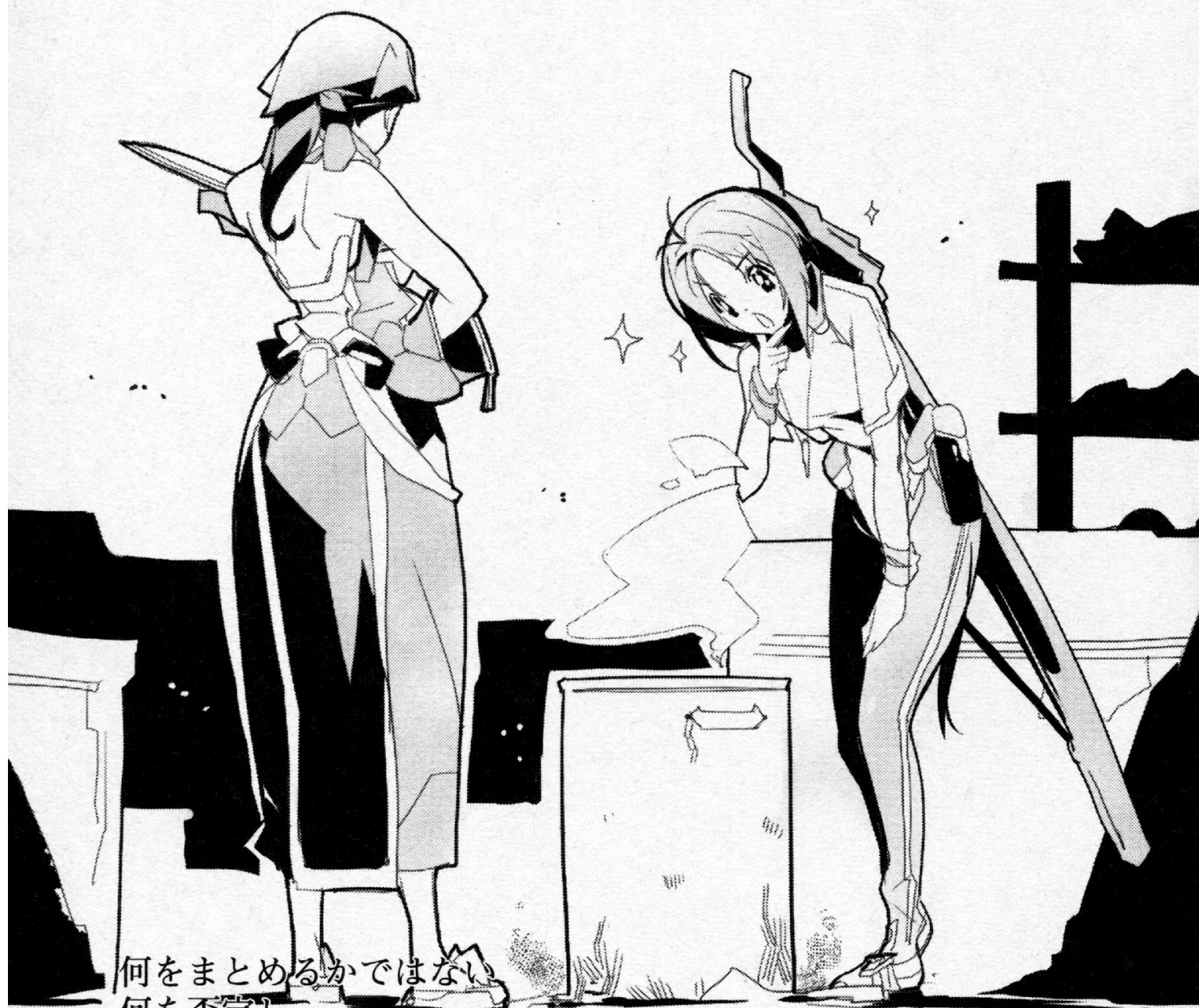
"The fun?"

"Indeed," he said. "The Siege of Odawara and the Tensho Jingo Conflict are a gamble. You have some thoughts on the matter, don't you? On what kind of battle would be worth betting your nation on, I mean."

Chapter 33: Attendees of a Road Meeting

第三十三章

『路上会議の出場者』



何をまとめるかではない
何を否定し
何を共有するかだ
配点（国家間）

It is not what you can finalize

It is what you can reject

And what you can share

Point Allocation (International Relations)

The meeting and meal were quietly held in front of the Main Blue Thunder.

It was not that there was complete silence. Musashi, Houjou, and Mouri had split into separate groups to go over a final check for the meeting.

Among them, Houjou Ujinao was discussing food orders with Kotarou, Ujiteru, and Genan.

...I wish we were at the Western food table...

Houjou was the Association of Indian States.

They could easily eat curry for three days in a row there, but Far Eastern food was also readily available.

And they were currently at the primarily Far Eastern table. A look at the table showed foods that could be described as “the usual lineup but in different flavors”.

She realized the ingredients were probably from Kantou and the cooking would be done by Musashi, so it would be Kantou-based, just like in Houjou.

To Ujinao, that was no more than somewhat idiosyncratic local food.

She felt that might change if it was a dessert, but...

...It's too bad.

“Ujinao-sama! As I was saying, if we consider stability after the battle...”

“Kotarou, Houjou will be dissolved as a clan, so does that really matter?”

“Ujinao-sama! Ujinao-sama! You’ve been really halfhearted about this tonight!”

The effects of food could be frightening.

...But when I looked for the Western food table...

It was Musashi's table.

Mouri's table was mostly a fusion of Far Eastern and Western styles, so that had to be the Musashi cuisine.

Ujinao observed which group was seated at which table.

...Musashi should have given more thought to that arrangement...

But when she thought back, she realized they had chosen a table on their own, so Musashi had done nothing wrong. Still, she did not like that Musashi was seated at the Western table.

Shouldn't they have considerably chosen the Far Eastern table?

Masazumi thought to herself while continuing preparations for the meeting.

...I feel like Houjou Ujinao is glaring at me...

But Ujinao's eyes were always closed, so the term "glare" did not really apply.

And Masazumi had another thought about the table they were seated at.

...I wish we had gotten the Far Eastern table...

She could eat Western food just fine, but this was a meeting. She wanted to avoid anything too fatty that would leave an aftertaste.

But the others had sat at the Western table.

That would be because Hexagone Française had brought some of their own food. Mitotsudaira had been lured in by the meat and Futayo was hooked on the pasta. Really hooked. It seemed to be a lost cause, but Asama tried to get everyone to calm down.

"C'mon, dig in like that and you'll gain weight."

"But, Asama-sama, if we hold the Western table, we will get Western desserts during dessert time. Wouldn't you like some of Toori-sama's thick cream, tarts, and ice cream?"

Asama folded at Horizon's words and that settled it.

With no other choice, Masazumi was eating a salad and ham between bread, but...

...Houjou really is glaring this way...

Hmm, she thought while feeling a fairly flavorless type of tension.

...I hope Mouri is preparing for this meeting properly.

...I'm so hungry...

Terumoto faced the “Musashi cuisine” on the table and could not eat any of it.

...Musashi Vice President, what is this nonsense about starting the meeting as soon as we get here?

Mouri-01 and the others had started checking over and lecturing her on the current situation, so dinnertime had become worktime.

“So, Princess, the Siege of Bitchu Takamatsu Castle will generally be made up of two battles. You could say that means we have two opportunities to negotiate for our interests there, so we would like to use that to our advantage. ...Princess?”

“Yeah, I’m listening, I’m listening.”

Her response was noticeably halfhearted.

Making these preparations while dying to eat was no easy task.

...I mean, this Musashi cuisine is a fusion of Far Eastern and Western styles...

She personally wanted Far Eastern food.

After all, she had only eaten Western food since leaving Hexagone Française.

That was because Mouri land was under Hexagone Française’s provisional rule.

Food on the Pension Versailles was generally Western, so that was all she had eaten during this eastward trip.

Terumoto was from the Far East, so while she was fine with Hexagone

Française food, she also liked Far Eastern food.

And since Musashi was holding a dinner party along with the meeting, she had chosen not to eat anything after the midday meeting. But when she got here...

...I have to wait?

“Kh...”

“Terumoto. Are you angry about something?”

She was not angry.

She was just hungry.

I'll eat after this. I'll definitely eat. I swear I'll eat.

That was her motivation for the meeting.

She wished it was the Far Eastern food in front of her, but the Musashi food was a fusion of that and Western food.

She decided to interpret that as the food having a Far Eastern flavor.

She started thinking it was the perfect match for someone who was both Mouri and Hexagone Française, but that may have just been the hunger talking.

...Yeah, I'll definitely be eating that fried fish chumaki afterwards.

That tofu cooked in peanut sauce has got to be good.

Oh, that pork cooked in mustard is more on the Western side of things, but I still want to eat it so bad.

Simply put, she was hungry.

And who was it that had put her in this position?

...The Musashi Vice President.

Masazumi thought to herself while continuing preparations for the meeting.

...I feel like Mouri Terumoto is glaring at me too...

She definitely was. When their eyes occasionally met, Terumoto would give

her a look that seemed to say “what’re you lookin’ at?”

Flat Vassal: “Umm, Vice President? Did you do something?”

Vice President: “No, nothing...”

Tonbokiri: “Masazumi, Lady Terumoto seems to be glaring at you whenever you eat something.”

Unturning: “Are you doing anything rude? Like chewing with your mouth open?”

Vice President: “No, I’m not doing that. I’m not doing any of the myriad chopstick-related breaches of etiquette either. ...Because I’m using a fork.”

Hori-ko: “Now, it’s scoring time.”

Vice President: “That wasn’t supposed to be a joke!”

Me: “Because I’m using a fork.”

Vice President: “Qu-quiet you...!”

When she bared her teeth toward the sign frame, Asama smiled bitterly next to her.

“Since the meeting hasn’t really started yet, I think it’s okay to eat. This here is the green pea soup and the turnip mincemeat I made. Also...”

Asama placed roast chicken on a plate. But it was not a whole roast. It was cut into somewhat thick strips, and...

“Toori-kun said to eat it with the horseradish sauce. ...And after that, try these.”

She passed Masazumi three thumb-sized paper wrappers.

“...What are these? They remind me of white bean paste bars.”

“They are mint marzipan made from thickening almond powder with mint and egg whites. He said to finish with them if you’re having a meeting.”

Mal-Ga: “Oh, those are the Main Blue Thunder’s rare candy! They really refresh your mouth during a late night.”

Gold Mar: “Ohh, Seijun, does that mean you’ll be ready for battle?”

“I see,” said Masazumi.

She figured they had to be good, but she was not entirely satisfied as she placed them in her hip pocket.

After taking a bite of the food, Masazumi took a breath. *The turnip is pretty good*, she thought. And...

“Okay, let’s get the meeting started.”

She could see both the other national representatives glaring at her.

“Good day...or good evening I guess. Are you closed today?”

The sounds of distant hammering echoed below the sky and a voice spoke atop the Musashi as the summer afternoon changed to evening.

In one corner of the shopping district on Tama’s surface, Oriotorai (who was wearing a shirt) stood in front of an open door.

She was peering inside the Blue Thunder. The one with the sign in English.

There were no customers inside the bakery/café. But the sounds of cooking and smells of salt and burning oil came from within.

“Oh, Sensei. ...How were the things I left you with?”

“Umm, do you mean Toori and Kimi?”

“No, no. I mean the ingredients you brought on the study camp.”

Someone walked out from the back carrying a steaming pot in both hands.

It was the manager. She wore mittens built to increase her grip strength and she placed the pot on the floor in front of the counter. Firewood was lined up there to keep it off the floor itself.

“There...we go.”

The wood creaked below the pot and gave off some smoke.

The pot contained a dark paste that was boiling and bubbling. Based on the smell...

“Oh, demi-glace... That’s pretty thick. And it smells a lot of wine...”

“I made it with low moisture, so it’s about seven times thicker than normal. It’s really hard to stir, so I have to use a *yoroi-doshi* I had at home to kind of cut through it as I stir it.”

“That sounds like you,” said Oriotorai as she looked to the counter which had no bread lined up on it.

Then she pointed toward the construction noise coming from the open door.

“Is this for them?”

“Judge. It’s to feed the construction workers. All of the restaurants are providing supplies on the Commerce and Industry Guild’s instructions. Our row is in charge today, so I’m making the base for a stew. ...They’ll boil water in a different pot and dilute it. The other places are making the ingredients to go in it, so they’ll mix it all together.”

“How many more are you making?”

“Four, probably. I’ve already finished two, so I’m having them carried out when they’re ready. It’s a lot of work.” The manager crossed her arms. “I really wanted Toori and Kimi’s help, but other than having Horizon take some extra bread, I don’t think I’m getting any help.”

“You’ve really helped us out. The bread Naruze and Naito brought during the day was from here, wasn’t it?”

“Well, those kids are such good customers.” The manager smiled. And, “I have some fat I skimmed off the top of this if you want it. It’s good when cooked with bread. It tastes like tomato, wine, and butter. You can also cook it with meat or vegetables.”

“Ohh. Then I’ll take a bottle. Also...”

“Yeah.” The manager nodded, leaned against the counter, and shrugged. “There don’t seem to be any intruders this time. ...I may not be the best person to ask since I didn’t notice those Celestial Dragons the other day, but I’m not detecting any odd movements like back at the Ariake. And the others all say the same thing.”

“Ootani Yoshitsugu showed up during the meeting earlier today...”

“The improvements Ei-san made to Musashi’s defenses are really strict when it comes to divine transmissions. Tomo-chan has made her own improvements and she purifies it when she has a chance, so it should be fine.” The manager smiled a little. “I don’t envy your position, Sensei. You can’t actually do anything yourself.”

“I just hope I’m supporting them enough to say ‘judge’ to that.”

“Then you can have the Principal send a message to the Commerce and Industry Guild. We know how important the series of battles starting tomorrow is. We want to support everyone, not have some simple tasks we’re in charge of. ...Can you have him instruct us to provide food or spell support as we see fit?”

Oriotorai smiled at that question. And...

“Can I have that?”

Hooks were attached to the underside of the thatched roof ceiling and vegetables and meat hung from them.

“I ate everything I had before going to Sanada for the study camp.”

“Want some sake too? It isn’t the good stuff since that’s not my specialty, but I can throw some of that in too.”

“Judge, please do.”

Then Oriotorai opened a sign frame as if she had just realized something, so the manager peered over at it.

“Have they started?”

“Judge, Masazumi just contacted me to say they’ve started the meeting.” Oriotorai raised her eyebrows in a smile. “Honestly, she can probably only send this message because she knows I’m supporting them. ...She probably means it as a way of telling me to leave this to them.”

“Now. how about we start with the first topic?”

The sky was dyed in the colors of sunset. That color starting in the west was

more of a light red than an orange.

But in front of the Main Blue Thunder, west was to starboard, which was where the building was.

So while below the café's eaves, Masazumi and the others were in deep shadows.

...Mouri is ahead and to the right and Houjou ahead and to the left.

She began the dinner meeting while facing both other groups.

And she stated the first topic:

"Our three powers need to reach a consensus on what our ultimate objective is here. If we are all aware of each other's goals, we should be able to complete the rest of the discussions more smoothly," said Masazumi. "Musashi's biggest objective is to liberate Kantou. To achieve that, we want to take as little damage as possible while completing the Siege of Odawara, the Tensho Jingo Conflict, and the Siege of Bitchu Takamatsu Castle." She swept her arms to either side. "Now, what is it you want? Let's have a frank discussion here."

The meeting place bathed in the light of the setting sun.

The aromas of various foods arrived from the dinner tables.

But all of it felt so distant to Terumoto.

...The sun sure is bright.

No, I guess there's nothing wrong with the setting sun being bright, she rethought before speaking.

"Our biggest objective for the Sieges of Odawara and Bitchu Takamatsu Castle?" She scratched her head. "That would be the cooperative relationship with the Kantou forces we could gain from the Kantou Liberation. Hexagone Française needs that if we're going to achieve our greatest objective of settling the outside world. But," she added. "We still don't know if the Kantou Liberation will work out. So we will keep every possible option open."

"Including your initial demand that we transfer Matsudaira's rights to you?"

Terumoto smiled a little at the Musashi Vice Chancellor's question.

...So you get it.

"Of course. When the situation changes, a nation has to change its course of action. Just like the tiniest thing can change what route someone takes to school or when they wake up in the morning, the personality of a nation can be changed by the tiniest thing. ...If fighting a war didn't change anything, it's a sign that the personality of your nation has grown dull."

Terumoto smiled bitterly in her heart.

I sound like I'm lecturing her, she thought about her own words.

But all of it is accurate, she added.

"Hexagone Française is a future conqueror and we will do whatever it takes to ensure that happens. If we can fight a war against Musashi via duels, then we will aim to benefit from it as much as possible. ...No complaints about that, right?"

That question did not move the Musashi Vice Chancellor's stance and gaze in the slightest.

...What a troublesome girl.

She aloofly held her own thoughts and was not shaken. The way she never let her feelings show was another way she did not mesh well with Terumoto.

And the Musashi Vice Chancellor girl would go on the offensive whenever she had the chance.

She had not fallen silent because she was cowed. She was simply thinking up an avenue of attack.

If you took her silence as a sign that she would do as you said, she would end up stabbing you.

...With this troublesome type, you have to keep an eye on them to the very, very end.

And that troublesome girl opened her mouth while looking to Terumoto along with the anteater Mouse on her shoulder.

“Agreed,” calmly said the Musashi Vice President. “In our role as the Matsudaira forces, Musashi is also promised a future as a conqueror. Thus, we too will do whatever it takes to become that conqueror. ...You are exactly right about that.”

When she heard the Musashi Vice President, Ujinao narrowed down what stance to take here.

...They have changed.

Musashi’s stance had changed since the meeting during the day.

During the day, Musashi had searched for a way for them all to work together. They had tried to use negotiation to draw out a path for that.

But Musashi was doing the opposite now.

...“In our role as the Matsudaira forces, Musashi is also promised a future as a conqueror”, hm?”

This was their response to Mouri’s talk of being a conqueror.

But she was not saying that they and Mouri were similar.

She was saying that, if Mouri would use any means necessary to become a conqueror, then Musashi would do the same.

She was saying they would oppose Mouri if need be.

And she had placed the responsibility of such a conflict on Mouri’s shoulders.

Because when Mouri had asked “no complaints about that, right?”, she had replied with “agreed”.

If Mouri had said nothing, that agreement never would have occurred. And by agreeing, she had started to cut off Mouri’s escape route.

It was a warning.

Ujiteru may have understood that because he spoke up while scooping some bamboo shoot and green onion cooked in soy sauce onto his plate.

“Excellent, excellent. ...Matsudaira is destined to rule the world one day, so

even Mouri will be under their control. Threatening each other with their future authority is a privilege of those who believe in a bright future. Don't you think?"

"Indeed," said Genan while sipping at some tea. "Because we will be destroyed..."

That was true, but her allies' attitude of hopelessness kind of irritated Ujinao.

Then the Musashi Vice President turned toward her with her eyebrows relaxed.

"What about Houjou? What kind of future do you see?"

"Testament. After the Siege of Odawara, we would like to swiftly join with Musashi and shift focus to the Kantou Liberation. So to end the Siege of Odawara..."

Ujinao looked to the two who had inherited names related to hers.

"You can execute these two. Ujiteru will in fact commit suicide to take responsibility for Hashiba."

"Waaaaait!?"

Ujinao heard the two behind her yell in complete unison.

Ujiteru hopped over from the left.

"Wait! Wait! You demonic niece! Have I ever done anything to you!?"

Genan hopped in from the right.

"Indeed! You demonic woman! Have I ever done anything to you!? Well, have I!?"

"Ujinao-sama! Ujinao-sama, these two are trying to provoke you!!"

They did not seem to care.

Genan slid his upper body side to side.

"Listen. I'm already supposed to be dead by the time the Siege of Odawara happens."

"Then shall I make sure you are both dead here and now, great uncle and

automaton?”

“Y-you demonic niece! You just made a clear distinction between Genan-dono and me, didn’t you!? ...Genan-dono! This is a distraction meant to divide us! Curse this girl...!”

Her uncle was being annoying, so she placed a hand on a sword at her hip and turned toward her uncle. That silenced him.

Then she spoke to the two of them.

“Let me say this up front: If things are looking bad for Houjou, please go ahead and commit seppuku. That will generally give us a satisfactory result.”

“Y-you demonic niece! Is this how you treat me after calling me here!? I’m leaving! I’m going back to Hachioji to sleep!”

“Hachioji Castle will be a scene of intense fighting during the Siege of Odawara, so please do not do anything rash.” Ujinao put some strength into her tone. “Maeda Toshiie is meant to participate in the attack on Hachioji. He has stayed with the Shibata forces instead of coming here, but I assume that is because opposing us would mean joining with Matsudaira. But,” she continued. “That means this is our only chance to complete the Siege of Odawara without P.A. Oda’s interference. So please do not do anything unnecessary.”

“Hahhhhh? Do you have any idea who you’re talking to!? Well?”

Ujinao opened a sign frame and pressed the “approve” button.

“Ah,” said Ujiteru just as lightning struck him.

Masazumi saw something she had never seen before: an automaton enveloped in plasma and writhing about.

The automaton danced on the ground while loud sounds seemed to split the air.

“Apepetereparaka! Raparapakekeketetetetepimohhhh!!”

He seemed to be babbling nonsense, so his numb tongue may have been moving on its own.

Masazumi watched as Ujiteru burst like a summer firework.

...Wow...”

That silent awe was honestly the only reaction she could find.

Vice President: “I kind of think of Houjou in terms of their Kamakura connection, you know? So I was hoping they would take things a little more seriously...”

Flat Vassal: “This reminds me of an evil organization’s punishments.”

Uqui: “And this indirectly changes my image of Noriki. Would this have happened to him if he made the slightest mistake?”

Hori-ko: “Toori-sama, you would actually like that kind of thing, wouldn’t you?”

Me: “Are you picturing me shouting, ‘Noooooooooooo! It’s too gooooooooooooooooooooood!’ or something!? That would be great! But since they’re Houjou, Noriki gets the first shot at it!”

10ZO: “I just imagined Noriki-kun doing that and I really wish I hadn’t!”

Mal-Ga: “...That’s it!!”

“Achoo!”

The Musashi engine division transport ship was descending in front of the Suwa Shrine on a western lake coast surrounded by forest.

The setting sun shined on the lake and forest, between which stood short houses and a flat-roofed building that seemed to be a workshop.

A Shinto shrine stood on a large area of land by the forest. The village was for the Suwa management and the affiliated Shinto corporation.

Lights were coming on in Suwa.

There were roads running east to west by the lake and there was a main road leading to the Suwa Shrine. There were spell bonfires along those roads and they began to illuminate the village more than the setting sun.

Noriki looked down from the deck at those preparations for night and Hiro spoke to him from a sign frame. The ends of her eyebrows were lowered and her mouth was spread horizontally.

“...What was that about? That was a really bad sneeze. Suwa is fairly elevated and it has a lake, so it gets chilly.”

“No, that just hit me out of the blue. Was someone talking about me?”

Laborer: “Hey, were any of you talking about me?”

10ZO: “No, no, not at all! We weren’t talking about anything at all!”

Mal-Ga: “Judge, that’s right. So don’t worry. ...I’ll make the drawings look good.”

Laborer: “Hold it right there.”

Masazumi glanced over to see the divine chat growing lively.

She faced forward to see the state of Houjou.

Their punishment seemed to be over. The automaton still lay on the ground with white smoke rising from him and Ujinao turned to face Masazumi.

“Houjou’s ultimate objective is the Kantou Liberation,” she said. “Because once the Siege of Odawara is complete, Houjou will be dissolved as a clan in accordance with the history recreation. Those dissolved forces will take on the Kantou Liberation as their final battle.”

After making her announcement, Ujinao breathed a shallow sigh that no one else would notice.

...This is my duty as Houjou’s final leader.

According to the Testament, after the Siege of Odawara, Matsudaira would be trapped in Kantou on Hashiba’s orders and it would absorb the remnants of both Takeda and Houjou.

That would likely happen as a matter of course.

The Testament told everyone that Matsudaira would rule the Far East. It was unknown if they would actually conquer the world or if they would be restricted with interpretations, but they were the greatest hope for the Far East.

If Musashi won the Sieges of Odawara and Bitchu Takamatsu Castle, it would give them a more powerful image.

And liberating Kantou would do so even more.

...If that happened...

Then every single nation was sure to begin stocking up for *what was to come*.

Everyone would look to the next age and seek the greatest benefit they could gain as things were.

Those who would be absorbed by Matsudaira would work to gain the best possible position under Matsudaira's rule.

Those who would serve Matsudaira would work to gain the best possible position in their own nation once they began serving Matsudaira.

What happened here could accelerate that.

So, thought Ujinao before speaking.

"This battle and the Kantou Liberation will provide Musashi with the foundation needed to become a great Far Eastern power. With that in mind...it is time we planned out tomorrow's battle."

Musashi did not immediately respond.

It was a voice from the ground that responded instead.

"You're a much better leader than me, demonic niece."

It was Ujiteru. The sign frames saying his body parts were rebooting appeared around him as he slowly got up.

"You just about cooked my brain well-done, demonic niece."

"That cooking it to rare did not kill you is a testament to Houjou technology."

"It is. It really is," said her uncle as if he were pleased with how this had

turned out. Then he awkwardly crossed his arms. “Listen. ...Are you listening?”

“...You always have been a stubborn uncle.”

“Just listen. Are you listening? Even if we are doomed...do a half-assed job and I’ll kill you!”

“Oh?” replied Ujinao. “You are inferior in machine specs, technique, strength, equipment, fortitude, subordinates, rank, and beauty and I have already killed you before, yet you claim you will kill me next?”

“Because I’ve finally caught up with you after you were ‘reincarnated’ as an automaton.” Ujiteru rubbed his head and smiled thinly. “Besides, you didn’t set my body to automatically punish me if I disobey you. Are you mocking me?”

“Such a setting would only invite carelessness. ...I know you will try to kill me, so I just have to be prepared to cut you down at any time. That was my decision.”

“...What an awful demonic niece. Just plain awful.” Ujiteru looked the other way and loudly clicked his tongue after three seconds. “If you’d used a setting like that, I was planning to break through it without you noticing so I could kill you when you showed an openiiiiing!”

“You are too easy to predict, uncle.”

...But that is what makes him Houjou Ujiteru.

In a way, Ujinao had absolute trust in that uncle.

He was insulting and overbearing, but he was even more obsessed with battle.

He had originally had a powerful drive to climb the ranks, but once she had taken the positions of Chancellor and Student Council President, he had started fighting on the front line to cheer himself up.

He was very decisive.

She was superior when it came to domestic affairs, diplomacy, and combat.

But that uncle was superior when it came to simply “crushing the enemy”.

After all, she had *killed him* once already.

So had her father and the other top retainers.

Because he had once tried to take control of Houjou but been stopped by her father and the others, Ujiteru had tried to take over Houjou from within. That was also why Ujinao's sickliness had been used as an excuse to *make her into an automaton* when she was young.

Although it did not seem Ujiteru had ever imagined the doll body containing that sickly child would become the most powerful individual in Houjou as the development line grew.

...He intended to use me as a puppet, but I ended up taking revenge a dozen years later.

When she had cut him down, Ujiteru had smiled.

And he had tried to cut her down countless times.

It was not that he was desperate.

He did not for a second think he was losing. Even when she had beheaded her uncle, she knew he would not have doubted his victory in the slightest.

She had allowed him to live on as an automaton. According to Kotarou, that had been a mistake, but according to the future she imagined, it had been the right thing to do.

She had made no mistake.

This uncle would crush their enemies. And...

“————”

They would win.

There was a part of the Siege of Odawara that they could win.

...Including me, Houjou can gain two victories.

It was unclear how much Genan and Kotarou could do, but she could be certain of her uncle's and her own victories.

And with that self-confident reasoning in mind...

“Now, let us plan out tomorrow's 'war'.”

...Planning out a war, is an incredible concept.

Would she call it “modern”?

Perhaps she should think of it as decisive.

But she did have her thoughts on the matter.

Vice President: “Everyone, we are about to discuss how many duels will be fought. We will also be discussing what we as nations are willing to bet on each battle, so I would like your help.”

Marube-ya: “Money!? You need money, right!? After being disgraced as a pooping girl, nothing you say can scare me off! So what’ll it be!? How much!?”

Worshiper: “Oh, I’m preparing more food with Hassan-kun and Aoi-kun, so don’t worry about that.”

Marube-ya: “You’re just going to ignore me!?”

It’s the only thing to do, thought Masazumi as someone unexpected responded.

Unturning: “I would like to ask that you make sure to have me fight one of the duels for the Siege of Odawara.”

It was Narumi.

Suzu sensed everyone focusing on Narumi without actually turning her way.

...Narumi...-san?

Suzu turned toward her and Narumi took a quiet breath without turning everyone’s way.

It was a breath of laughter.

But it was also a “sound” that only Suzu would pick up on. As if to say...

...Don’t...worry?

That was how Suzu interpreted it.

But she blushed when she realized it was a message only for her.

Then Urquiaga spoke.

Urqui: “Do not worry, everyone. ...Narumi is a battle-crazed warrior.”

Unturning: “I enjoy how being with you shows me new attractive sides to myself.”

This time, Narumi took a breath loud enough for anyone to hear.

Unturning: “It’s simple: The Date clan participates in the Siege of Odawara. But Date is currently trying to get back on its feet and Oniniwa-san will join Hashiba. ...They could always send Masamune here, but then none of their main fighters would remain in Sendai castle.”

Bell: “...They don’t have...any fighters?”

Unturning: “Judge, that’s right. They don’t.”

She could have sworn there had been more than that, but was she remembering wrong? But if Narumi said so...

Bell: “I...see.”

“Okay! Thank you, everyone, for another day repairing Sendai Castle! This is the Vice President who is treated like garbage when the President and Vice President are compared! Hey! Hey, 1st year girl there! Don’t look away! Hey, you! The girl with the beautiful long black hair! ...Don’t pull out your sword to cut your hair all of a sudden! Is it that hot today!? Oh? In that case, I shall warm you up! C’mon, dive right into my chest! You’re ignoring me!? You’re ignoring me, aren’t you!? Or did you have an extremely sheltered upbringing that’s placed a division between your mind and the outside world!? I get it now! You can’t help it then! Remember this, okay!? ...Anyway, everyone, I have something to ask of you! You know how the Seiryu cut right through here before? Well, my room is on the top floor there and it was sliced in half! ...You knew!? You knew that, everyone!? So you were worried about me!? You say it serves me right!? What a strange way to support me! Thanks! Now my question is why my room is the very last thing on Sendai Castle’s repair schedule!? Are

you saving the best for last!? Oh, so that's it! ...Who was that who called me annoying!? Thank you very much!"

Unturning: "We do have someone else who isn't much of a fighter and causes harm during peacetime as well."

Oh, him, thought Suzu.

The one who's similar to Kojirou-san. Whose name is, I mean.

There were so many different kinds of people at Date, she thought as Narumi continued speaking.

Unturning: "So I will assist with the Siege of Odawara as part of the Date clan."

Uqui: "Narumi. ...Come back soon."

Unturning: "Are you not aware that I have nowhere else to return to?"

Suzu had a thought while listening to everyone give cries of "ohhh".

...Narumi-san...doesn't have it easy.

It would not have been smooth sailing after arriving on the Musashi.

Just as Mary occasionally worried about England and Mitotsudaira had her thoughts about Hexagone Française, a former home was an important thing.

It did not matter if they had run away or if there had been a falling out.

Everyone was here due to their respective positions and advantages.

That may have been why Masazumi responded the way she did.

Vice President: "I appreciate it."

And then she said more.

Vice President: "Just to be clear, there is one thing we have to watch out for here. We are about to fight four battles: the Tensho Jingo Conflict, the Siege of Odawara, the Siege of Bitchu Takamatsu Castle, and the Siege of Kanie Castle. But in my opinion..."

Suzu listened.

Vice President: “We should avoid using our main fighters for these battles.”

...Eh?

Suzu heard everyone’s silence.

...She isn’t going to...send everyone into battle?

That meant she was not having them take an active role in this war.

Suzu thought, *Is Masazumi all right?*

Adele must have thought the same thing.

She said nothing and simply kept piling pasta onto her plate.

She had clearly taken far too much, but she must have been distracted. Or maybe she really did want to eat that much. Suzu was not really sure. *But I had some of that earlier and the garlic was really strong, so be careful, Adele.*

Especially with tomorrow morning in mind.

Remember those gyoza you regretted eating, Adele.

But everyone had to be thinking the same thing: Masazumi had said something strange.

But they could not make any careless statements at the moment.

This was an international meeting, so they could not let their surprise show.

Besides, if they asked “Masazumi, have you gone insane?” here, it would be an international incident. That might be a normal enough question for the people of Musashi, but they needed to avoid any strange statements here. Yes.

So Suzu remained just as silent as everyone else.

“————”

And in that silence, a voice shouted from the café.

“Seijun! Have you gone crazy!?”

Hearing the crossdresser, Masazumi lifted her shoulders and turned around.

“Shut up! I’m trying to think, so be quiet!”

She took a breath and brushed back her hair.

Vice President: “Listen carefully.”

Her voice reached them.

Vice President: “The Kantou Liberation is what really matters. If we can accomplish that, the east of the Far East will be a Matsudaira force! That will allow us to attack Hashiba or P.A. Oda without worrying about our back.”

Which meant...

Vice President: “We will have the foothold we need to demand Hashiba fights Sekigahara and Komaki Nagakute and to demand P.A. Oda does Honnouji. We must complete the Kantou Liberation if we want that. So...”

So...

Vice President: “We will use our main fighters on the Kantou Liberation and we will try to use our secondary fighters for the Siege of Odawara, the Tensho Jingo Conflict, and the Siege of Bitchu Takamatsu Castle. ...Can we do that?”

Masazumi gave everyone a challenging look. And...

83: “Well, if you insist.”

Something was not right. “No, wait,” said Masazumi before clearing her throat.

Vice President: “Umm, even if they’re only our secondary fighters, they still have to, y’know, fight.”

Sticky King: “It looks like this is in our hands...”

Vice President: “I was looking for someone we could be confident would win...”

Obscene: “It would seem it is finally time for us to get serious.”

...Will this turn out all right?

Suzu felt an awkward sweat on her back.

But who else could be one of their secondary fighters?

Ookubo sighed as she stared into the empty frappe container.

The Satomi Student Council President had told her the situation with Houjou and then left.

Ookubo's job often required speaking with upperclassmen and underclassmen, but when it came to another nation's Student Council President from the same year as her...

...I was overly polite.

It was partially because that girl was adored by those upperclassmen.

That was partially because of her position and because she was a leader much like them, but...

...I felt kind of jealous.

Ookubo shook her head.

"What a frightening thought."

She could not allow herself to want those people to pay attention to her.

That would be far too dangerous.

Yes, what she felt about the Satomi Student Council President was something else.

...It was just my indiscriminate desire to have people focus on me.

She did not like it when someone ignored her, even if it was those upperclassmen. That was what it was.

And she knew what it was she felt about the Satomi Vice President herself: ...
That her position can't be easy.

After all, they were fighting a war starting the next day.

Of course, war breaking out was unavoidable given the Vice President's habits. And Ookubo was at fault too for having accepted that girl's methods.

She had to stick with that girl until it destroyed her. It was like a game of chicken to see who was destroyed first.

But Ookubo knew fighting on the front line had to be dangerous.

“I mean...”

She looked to her left arm. She had grown accustomed to that white prosthetic attached to her shoulder.

That arm could be seen as what she was now, but when she thought about that happening to someone else, she wanted to stop it.

Of course, there was no guarantee something like that would happen and she was not going to reject any and all risk. But...

“————”

“Herrrrre y’go! Y’r ord’r’s r’dyyyyyyyy!”

She was given the same thing that the Satomi Student Council President had ordered.

It was a lassi frappe. She felt like she was eating too many cold things today, but she decided to think of it as following that girl’s example.

She took the container and held it up so no one else would notice.

...Good luck with the pre-battle negotiations.

She was part of the rear guard, so she had to manage materiel and the various Committee Heads.

I need to work hard, she told herself just before a sign frame opened.

Vice President: “Hey, Ookubo? You want to represent us during tomorrow’s Siege of Odawara or Bitchu Takamatsu Castle, right? This is your chance to make more of a name for yourself. Okay, I’ll give you one of the duels. Do your best.”

“Wait just a second!!”

The divine transmission had already ended.

Asama: “Um, Ookubo-san is making a persistent communication attack against you, Masazumi.”

Vice President: “Hmm. Can you just ignore her?”

Asama: “You should probably find a way to stop her. If Ookubo-san takes this too far, well, it could be designated a crime.”

Gold Mar: “For example?”

Asama: “If you commit a forcible act of stalking on the divine network, a Shinto stalker alarm will sound, the fingers typing on your sign frame will feel like burning needles were inserted below your fingernails, an ‘indescribable presence’ will follow behind you for half a year and gently pour two *sho* of purified water into your butt, and you will be banned from sending divine transmissions to the target.”

10ZO: “Wouldn’t that last part be enough? And what in the world is an ‘indescribable presence’?”

Asama: “Well, you know how the malevolent gods were chased around until they surrendered during the creation of the nation? One of them seems to have taken it in stride and wants to do it himself now.”

Smoking Girl: “An eye for an eye?”

Asama: “Yes, our shrine’s representative from five generations ago apparently saw a Hammurabi exhibit when the Musashi was in the Middle East and she decided ‘that’s it!’.”

Unturning: “...Why do you all look satisfied with that answer?”

Uqui: “Experience, Narumi. You will be the same before long.”

Is that really good enough...? wondered Masazumi with a sinking feeling as she had Ookubo removed from the list of divine punishment targets.

Then she took a breath and thought about something else.

...I guess we do have a fair number of secondary fighters.

“Okay.” She turned to face Terumoto. “To start with, I would like to determine the number of duels for the Siege of Odawara and the Tensho Jingo Conflict. Is that all right?”

“Testament. We mostly just have two battles, so you decide on those first.”

Terumoto smiled and crossed her arms.

No one had touched the food in front of her.

...I guess I should be considerate.

Yes, she thought as she said one last thing before turning toward Houjou.

“Feel free to start eating. I wouldn’t want your food getting cold.”

“Don’t worry about it, idiot. Besides, we’re mostly automatons.” Terumoto laughed quietly. “We don’t need to eat.”

...Now I’ve done it!

Terumoto cursed her own vainglory.

...No, I’m clearly just hungry.

She was far too honest with her specialty. This threatened a lot, including progress of the meeting.

Well, it’ll work out, she decided while reaching for a nearby glass.

Since this was the Musashi cuisine table, it contained Far Eastern wine.

In her current state, it truly was the water of life.

...What is wrong with me...?

To keep her stomach from being too empty, she drank some while pretending to just check its aroma.

How long is that going to last me? she wondered as she heard Ujinao’s voice.

That horribly quiet and calm voice said the following:

“As the Houjou Representative, I have two suggestions here.”

“First,” said Ujinao. “Houjou would like for the following negotiation to count as the Tensho Jingo Conflict. After all, the Tensho Jingo Conflict was fought between Houjou and Matsudaira, but it was a territorial dispute that was ultimately settled peaceably. And while the following negotiation will

determine the rules for the Siege of Odawara, it will touch on our interests such as territory, so we can view it as an international territorial dispute.”

And...

“Second. As we said during the day, we would like for the rules we decide on for the Siege of Odawara to also apply to the Siege of Bitchu Takamatsu Castle. ...If our battle is handled separately, it will be more difficult to predict the total losses, which would hinder the later Kantou Liberation. How about that?”

When she asked that, the other two national representatives eventually nodded.

Terumoto gave a snort and turned toward the Musashi Vice President.

“If they’ll be fought on the same battlefield with the same rules, can we send personnel to Houjou in the same way? Well?”

The Musashi Vice Chancellor responded to Terumoto with a hand on her chin.

“Judge. Musashi would find that easier to deal with. And treating this meeting as the Tensho Jingo Conflict means one less battle we have to fight, which we would appreciate. But with the Siege of Odawara...”

“Testament. With the attacks on the primary castles and the other castles, it will cover a wide area. We need to start by discussing whether to do all that or to summarize it.”

Meaning...

“The more deals we have to make after the battle, the more difficult the Kantou Liberation will be. ...But if we prioritize the Kantou Liberation, we will have fewer deals to make after the battle. That is what it means.”

Ujinao spoke while opening a sign frame and displaying a map of the Houjou Association of Indian States.

“Houjou is a powerful force that rules the 3 million *koku* of eight nations. There are many castles there. What matters is how many are involved in the Siege of Odawara.”

Several village and castle icons appeared on the map and Ujinao added a vermilion circle to some of them.

“The number is greater than 20.”

That was a lot.

Even with all of Houjou’s representatives gathered, they could not secure that many personnel. But in that case...

“Let us negotiate how exactly we will convert this into a series of duels, Musashi.”

Houjou was doomed to fall. How would Musashi deal with a nation that had no future but shared the Kantou Liberation as a goal?

“Let us begin.”

Masazumi gasped in her heart at what Ujinao had said.

...More than 20 castles!?

She looked up in doubt, but Ujinao nodded and tapped the back of her sign frame.

“When talking about the Siege of Odawara, we often focus entirely on the final flooding, but Hashiba actually begins by attacking castles all across our land and then crushes the primary castles leading to Odawara. It begins with...”

Five.

“Yamanaka Castle, Takanosu Castle, Ashigara Castle, Nirayama Castle, and Shimoda Castle.”

The next group of primary castles and other castles stretched not just to Edo but to Satomi territory.

“Matsuida Castle, Kurihashi Castle, Minowa Castle, Tatebayashi Castle, Tsukui Castle, Tamanawa Castle, Matsuyama Castle, Edo Castle, Kogane Castle, Toke Castle, Usui Castle, Honsakura Castle, Kawagoe Castle, Iwatsuki Castle, Hachigata Castle, Oshi Castle, Hachioji Castle, Katakura Castle, and Narahara Castle.”

It was far too many to remember.

Ujinao seemed to understand that.

“For the number, let us combine the earlier ones with these for 25 in all.”

That was a lot.

If they fought that many duels, Houjou would never have enough people.

They said they would get support from Mouri for that, but they still would not have enough.

In that case, what would they do?

...They might take personnel from the Kantou forces.

That would mean Musashi would have to supply personnel after Mouri had.

That would be dangerous.

It could hinder the Kantou Liberation.

83: “This is my time to shine.”

Please spare me that.

...And that's not the point!

After shouting at herself, Masazumi came to her senses.

She realized something about what Houjou had said.

...It isn't possible!!!!

25 duels was simply out of the question. But if Houjou was trying to argue for it, they had to have some other purpose.

Why was Houjou presenting this ridiculous number?

“To negotiate.”

They were asking for something in return for reducing the number of castles.

If they did not reduce that number and thus reduce the number of battles, it would mean mutual destruction.

In other words...

...She's negotiating using our futures as collateral!

Masazumi reassessed Houjou.

Ujinao was using their goal of the Kantou Liberation to display their form of justice while also trying to benefit from it as much as possible.

Perhaps that meant she had a good grasp of the distinction between the ideal and reality.

She would display the ideal and advance toward it, but if she gained anything from that, she did not shun it as “dirty”.

That was it.

Houjou was attempting the Kantou Liberation while under P.A. Oda's rule.

That was who they were up against here.

This negotiation was well worth calling the Tensho Jingo Conflict. It really would rival a war.

So what did Masazumi have to do?

She prepared herself for the bargaining of negotiation.

But before she could take another breath, someone stepped forward.

“Crossdressing Honda-kun, please leave this to me.”

It was Neshinbara.

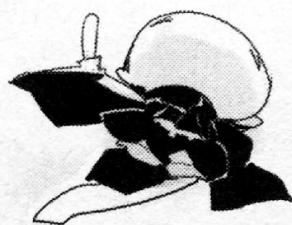
He pushed his glasses up his nose and turned a sharp look toward Ujinao.

“It is time for a biased history-lover to dissect the Siege of Odawara.”

Chapter 34: Instigator at a Road Meeting

第三十四章

『路上会議の仕掛け人』



それは過去からの遺産
豊穰の時を経て宿る
右手の疼きと痛み
配点（出番だ……）

It is inherited from the past

It resides within after times of prosperity

This throbbing and aching of my right hand

Point Allocation (It's my time to shine...)

Neshinbara swung his right hand.

There was no meaning to it. It would make him look cool and it would frighten his opponent because they assumed there was something to it.

“Now, it seems we need to take a look back at the Testament’s history...”

That ellipsis was important. It was traditional, but it was important to follow the basics.

Houjou Ujinao responded with a light tilt of the head.

“Is there a problem with our history?”

Oh, don't worry about it.

...I just wanted to say it, so don't take it so seriously.

This is the problem with amateurs, thought Neshinbara as he continued speaking.

“Come forth, Heavenly Emperor Michizane.”

With those words, Michizane appeared from his neck hard point part.

Even as a Mouse, he made no mascot-like movements. Rolling or hopping out of the hard point part simply was not intimidating enough.

So Neshinbara had it set up so Michizane would float out of the hard point part. The processing allowing him to pass through the physical object prevented him from doing anything else for a few seconds, but that kind of practical issue was not what mattered. Neshinbara believed he was stronger this way.

And Neshinbara spoke to Michizane once he had appeared. With a swing of his right arm.

“Michizane, open the sign frame. *The crucial one.*”

Yes, those words were crucial.

Because if he used motion controls like everyone else, swinging his arm would have made Michizane open the sign frame.

So when he set up motion controls, he always gave them two steps. He realized ones like “clench your fist, open it, and swing your arm,” were really three steps, but that was fine. It just meant he had grown even stronger without realizing it. *That is a sign of my talent. Heh heh. I’m even better than I thought. I need to reassess my status later.*

At any rate, it was easier on Michizane if he gave oral instructions when he had the time.

Michizane opened the sign frame without looking back.

It was blank., which was to be expected when Neshinbara had not actually told him what to display.

So...

...Um.

He manually called up his databank and dug through the historical data he had gathered and compiled.

...There it is, there it is.

Mal-Ga: “Hurry it up.”

Novice: “Taking my time feels more intimidating for the other side. You just don’t get it.”

Smoking Girl: “Hey, Neshinbara. Does your Mouse hate you?”

Novice: “Now that’s just rude! We get along great!”

Hanami: “...”

Asama: “Hanami? Feel free to say whatever you want concerning Michizane.”

The others were far too noisy.

But while they bought him some time, Neshinbara completed his preparations.

“Now, then,” he said. “There are two main parts to the Siege of Odawara. The first is the preliminary conquering of the castles across Houjou land and the second is the conquering of the primary castles, including the actual siege of Odawara Castle.”

Gold Mar: “We already heard that.”

Bell: “Yes...Ujinao-san...told us.”

Tachibana Wife: “Master Muneshige, is there any reason to repeat what the other person has already said?”

But you two are always saying “Have you eaten?” “I have eaten.” and things like that! thought Neshinbara as he displayed his gathered information.

And with a sigh in his heart, he made a comment to help them grasp the situation.

Novice: “I am about to talk a bit about the Siege of Odawara, okay?”

Unturning: “Since I will be taking part, I would like to hear it.”

Now that’s more like it. It speaks to my love of exposition.

Neshinbara could not help but smile thinly as he spoke.

Novice: “The Siege of Odawara is a major battle to conquer the entirety of Houjou territory. You shouldn’t think of it like your average castle siege or battle. Keep that in mind, okay?”

Adele did not know very much about Kantou.

No, it was more accurate to say she did not know much about it outside of Oushuu. She thought of Kantou as “foreign”. She had learned about it in history and literature class, but...

...Hmm. I never thought I would interact with foreign nations this much...

She had long expected that the Chancellor intended to do something in the future, but her imagination had been restricted by the baseless idea that it would happen under the powerful authority of the Testament Union and would never leave Europe.

But the next thing she knew, they were leaving Europe, visiting Russia, and eating tasty rice.

...I've experienced so many strange things...

That said, she did not want to be ignorant here, so she decided to ask.

Flat Vassal: “Um, just how big of a battle are we talking about?”

Novice: “Roughly speaking, from here to Sanada in the north. Then take that north-south line all the way east until it reaches the coast and Satomi. ...Does that make sense?”

Adele thought about it.

She thought about the location and size of Kantou on the Far Eastern map and how Koushinetsu bordered it to the west.

She pictured a massive amount of land that covered the entire southern end of Kantou.

“That’s humongous!”

No, it was more long than big.

It was a long band of land extending east to west. The distance from east to west was about the same if not longer than the width of a large nation like Hexagone Française.

...Wow.

She had let her guard down because Kantou would become Matsudaira’s later on and because the Satomi Student Council President’s Satomi clan was there too.

Houjou was a large nation. It was on the same scale as one of the European nations.

Silver Wolf: “Of course, from a historical perspective, Matsudaira’s forces had entered Kantou from Mikawa, so Houjou does not rule all of that.”

“But,” added the 5th Special Duty Officer.

Silver Wolf: “Houjou has a strong hold over the area from Sagami to Edo. At this time, even Satomi was driven into the peninsula where they succumbed to

Houjou.”

That meant they were currently at that large nation’s headquarters.

And they would try to conquer it tomorrow.

...That’s crazy.

But...

“Yes.”

She kind of understood.

Adele understood why Houjou and the Vice President wanted to complete this battle using duels.

...We can’t fight such a large battle, can we?

They would use the approach of summer break as a justification.

But they actually wanted to complete the battle in a hurry so they could complete the Kantou Liberation before Hashiba could intervene.

However, Houjou wanted to gain as much as they could before they were destroyed.

And this battle was their last chance to profit as a nation.

That was why Houjou was insisting on fighting so many battles. They intended to use the great size of the battlefield to bargain and that negotiation would qualify as the Tensho Jingo Conflict.

Flat Vassal: “Secretary. ...How does the Siege of Odawara play out?”

Neshinbara sent a map of Kantou to everyone’s sign frames.

And he drew an arrow into Houjou territory from the west.

Novice: “Generally, Hashiba’s forces follow the Tokaido and enter from the west. Matsudaira had land in Kantou at the time, but Mikawa was their primary territory and the land in Kantou was really just an extension from Mikawa. Also, Hashiba and Matsudaira joined forces on their way to Houjou.”

Flat Vassal: “Did Hashiba and Matsudaira get along?”

Novice: “On the surface, yes. ...But Hashiba still had the advantage at the time. Matsudaira was also on good terms with Houjou, so I think they decided to abandon Houjou as a way of showing they meant no harm to Hashiba. And Hashiba was able to see which of the Kantou forces joined the battle as a way of determining their loyalty. But more importantly...”

Hashiba must have feared Matsudaira, thought Neshinbara. Because...

Novice: “Houjou’s land became Matsudaira’s land after the battle, but that was a ploy by Hashiba. Hashiba wanted an excuse to distance Matsudaira from Kansai where they were.”

“But,” said Neshinbara.

Novice: “Matsudaira did not have it easy. To demonstrate that they had no connection to Houjou, they had to split into smaller units and fight battle after battle upon arriving at Odawara Castle under Hashiba’s watchful eye. ...They had to fight all the castles that supported Odawara Castle like Houjou Ujinao mentioned. And after some reinforcements arrived from Hokuriku, this wide-range battle came to an end.”

Vice President: “But that end was a quick one, wasn’t it? They got Odawara Castle to surrender by flooding it.”

Novice: “The schedule has their full forces conquering the Houjou castles before they do that.”

First, the Hashiba forces crushed Houjou’s western castles while traveling along the Tokaido. That was partially to ensure they were not attacked from behind, but also...

Novice: “They crushed 5 castles in particular to use as footholds.”

That was the preliminary part of the battle.

Hashiba and Matsudaira would place the foundation of their forces at Hakone and Shimoda.

Mal-Ga: “That sounds like a hot spring tour to me.”

Novice: “That’s why Hashiba showed off his power to the Kantou forces by calling in his mistress Yodogimi and holding a festival during the flooding.

Meanwhile, the Matsudaira forces, the Uesugi forces from Hokuriku, and Hashiba's own forces crushed Houjou's supporting castles."

Neshinbara had a single thought about that:

It would be unthinkable now, but it was only natural back then.

Novice: "In an age without divine transmissions, when you were surrounded by a large army, being flooded, and isolated, you could only wonder how your distant allies were being defeated. ...I can't imagine how stressful that was for Houjou."

Houjou would be in a similar situation now.

Divine transmissions existed now, but Houjou was under P.A. Oda's control.

That was of course the proper course of things according to Houjou's history recreation, but it isolated them from the other nations while they were destroyed by Hashiba which was, in fact, P.A. Oda.

They had no other option. They had nothing to cling to or rely on.

They were simply isolated and forced to meet their ruin at the end of a misunderstanding.

...I see.

Neshinbara felt like he understood why Noriki had come to the Musashi and what he had said.

He would protect her.

And so he had gone to acquire a means of destroying her.

"I see..."

Mal-Ga: "Did you say something?"

She would have had to read his lips from sniping distance.

...That's fine.

Neshinbara made a definition.

Novice: "I more or less understand now."

Houjou felt a certain way about their situation.

Novice: “Houjou is lonely.”

Naito: “...Bara-yan...just said something, didn’t he?”

Me: “Houjou is...nn...lonely...nn.”

Hori-ko: “Toori-sama, that is both disturbing and rude. It would be more accurate to say, ‘Ho-johhhh is lohn-lyyy’.”

Silver Wolf: “Um, Horizon? Throwing new gags out there without warning is bad for my heart.”

Asama: “Was that supposed to be an Indian accent?”

Vice President: “Hey, Neshinbara, do you see how I feel now?”

Novice: “Yes, I never imagined I would come to understand you...”

“Honestly,” someone said with a sigh.

The wind carried the scent of food above a river.

London existed on the second level of the floating island of England and the Thames flowed through there.

A city block was built on the sole bridge over that river.

“Buildings on the bridge are tax-free.”

Due to that loophole, the wealthy had built their mansions on the bridge.

The bridge had eventually grown too filled with homes to cross, so a path had been formed atop the roofs.

“But the tax-free residents charge a toll to cross the bridge.”

The voice came from someone on the edge of the roof of a building on the bridge.

A girl was reading a book while lying on the slanted thatch roof. She wore a white cloak altered to resemble a short jacket and she held the book up to catch the light of the setting sun.

“Not even being alone is free.”

She closed the book she held up while lying on her back.

The sun had sunk too far, so she could no longer read it. And that was why Shakespeare sat up.

“Why does he only notice when someone else is lonely?”

Neshinbara checked his divine mail sign frame.

...Nothing from Shakespeare.

Something usually arrived at times like this, but it was just as distracting when she did not react.

...This really throws me off.

He knew she had to be watching and she would have had her thoughts on what he said.

She was always so harsh with him, but she would sit and wait when something had her feeling down.

You need to talk with people more, thought Neshinbara. You have a lot going for you there.

“Now, then.”

He had a lot to think about, but he decided to put that off until later.

This was not the time for personal matters and emotions. Shakespeare would understand that.

So...

“Let’s get started.”

Neshinbara looked to Ujinao.

There was just one thing on his mind here.

...I need to think about this.

This opponent is alone. Ohh, how cool.

But realistically speaking, that has to be painful.

I know what it's like.

When I was alone, I could work to cheer myself up, but the next thing I knew, that loneliness threatened to crush me.

I know what it's like.

So I will say it.

I will say it without fear.

I will say it despite being Matsudaira, one of the causes behind Houjou's isolation.

He first swung his right hand.

“There are 5 preliminary castles and 20 supporting castles around Odawara.”

He saw comments of “Again...?” on the divine chat, but he ignored them.

He lightly tapped his sign frame.

“There are a few of these we can eliminate, aren't there?”

Neshinbara formed his words.

“First, let's eliminate some based on the size of the castle.”

Because...

“Not all castles are largescale structures. If you surround a simple mansion with walls and use it as a base, it becomes a castle. Conversely, even if military commanders stay there for a long period, the categorization of a Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines is less likely to change.”

Musashino: “Has Neshinbara-sama begun his excessive exposition again? Over.”

Why is that coming from you!? he thought, but he appreciated having some backup.

He faced Houjou Ujinao once more and looked to her expressionless and close-eyed face.

“Of the five castles you mentioned before, Takanosu Castle and Ashigara Castle are guard castles built in Mount Hakone.”

“Allow me to explain,” said Neshinbara. “A guard castle is a castle that guards and monitors the surrounding region. Unlike a fortress, it functions as a castle, but there is no lord of the castle who lives there. So...”

So...

“When looking at this as a series of duels, the guard castles have no lord and thus have no opponent for us to fight.”

Neshinbara looked to his opponent.

Houjou Ujinao was facing him, but...

...No reaction, hm?

It looked like she felt no need to say anything.

Thus, he formed his own words as if throwing a stone to see what she would do.

“The preliminary duels can be fought using the three remaining castles.”

Neshinbara erased Takanosu Castle and Ashigara Castle from the list of five castles.

That left three on the list:

- **Yamanaka Castle, Nirayama Castle, Shimoda Castle.**

“These three castles had a lord, so we can conclude you have the right to demand a duel for them.”

Neshinbara was cautious with his words.

“Now, this is where things get interesting.”

He just wanted to say that. Saying it kept the attention on him.

He swung his right hand back and raised his fingers to claw at empty air. His nails did not actually catch at anything. The trick was to pull back his shoulder

and elbow like there was some kind of resistance and to wiggle his fingers a bit.

He pulled the arm all the way back.

And he used that hand to operate his sign frame.

“Let’s break down the remaining supporting castles. First, here is the list you gave before.”

He displayed the list of marked castles:

- **Matsuida Castle, Kurihashi Castle, Minowa Castle, Tatebayashi Castle, Tsukui Castle, Tamanawa Castle, Matsuyama Castle, Edo Castle, Kogane Castle, Toke Castle, Usui Castle, Honsakura Castle, Kawagoe Castle, Iwatsuki Castle, Hachigata Castle, Oshi Castle, Hachioji Castle, Katakura Castle, Narahara Castle.**

There were a lot of them.

But there was no need to memorize them.

“Let’s reduce that number.”

He used the same filter as before, but he added more to it.

“In addition to the size, whether or not the castle has a lord is an important factor. If the castle lacks someone with the right to a duel, there is no point in including it in the number of duels.”

So Neshinbara cut down the castles that did not have a lord.

- **Matsuida Castle, Tsukui Castle, Hachigata Castle.**

“That actually cuts it down this far.”

He swung both arms to gesture toward the others. And just then...

“Wait just a moment,” said Houjou Ujinao with an almost icy voice.

...Here it comes.

His thought coincided with Ujinao’s words.

“If you are eliminating the castles without a lord, what will you do about Odawara Castle where all the castle lords are gathered? Will you add a duel for

each of the lords once Odawara Castle is added to the list?”

“The lord of Odawara Castle is you, Houjou Ujinao.”

Ohh, I'm talking with someone who's going to go down in history. This is incredible! he thought while continuing on.

“Even when Odawara Castle is added, the number of duels will only increase for you. ...Just the once.”

Neshinbara sent his words out while mentally solidifying his plan.

...I need to judge this.

How much did Houjou Ujinao pursue the ideal?

Or was she the opposite: someone who pursued reality?

That would tell him something:

...How much Houjou Ujinao wants to benefit from this battle.

If she pursued the ideal, she would prioritize the Kantou Liberation over the destruction of Houjou and she would try to minimize the number of Odawara duels.

But if she was more realistic, she would prioritize the destruction of Houjou over the Kantou Liberation and she would try to maximize the number of Odawara duels.

Which was it?

Neshinbara wanted to weigh that on the scales here.

So he forcibly eliminated the duels.

If she did not fight back, then she was an idealist. And it would put her entirely on their side.

Flat Vassal: “Didn’t you go a little far with that elimination?”

Marube-ya: “Yes, even if she is on our side, I’m pretty sure going in that strong will get her to strike back. It could work if we did that at the end when we already had the advantage, but if you do it without thinking, you generally

end up losing in the end.”

Mal-Ga: “Do you know what you’re doing here? Masazumi.”

Novice: “Ask me!! Me!!”

Now that they mentioned it, he did think he had gone a little overboard.

But what was done was done.

...What matters is sticking to your guns!

With that in mind, Neshinbara asked a question.

“That’s seven duels when Odawara Castle is included. How about that?”

Ujinao looked up a little. Her eyes were still closed, but she was clearly sensing him.

“May I ask one thing?”

“What is it?”

“Testament.” She nodded and then opened her mouth. “What about the interactions between military commanders for the history recreation?”

“The Matsudaira forces participated in the Siege of Odawara,” said Ujinao. “The group known as Matsudaira’s Four Heavenly Kings participated in the attacks on many of the castles and helped conquer them. ...Since we are viewing this as a history recreation, your Matsudaira forces must complete your own history recreation. And matters of the castle’s size or the presence of a lord are irrelevant to that.”

Ujinao changed the subject.

“Now, here is a list of the castles that the Matsudaira forces played a major role in.”

She lightly tapped her sign frame.

“First, the preliminary battles.”

- **Ashigara Castle, Takanosu Castle, Yamanaka Castle.**

There were three.

Asama: “Huh? That’s the same number that Neshinbara-kun proposed.”

Me: “What was it like to start with?”

Silver Wolf: “Um, the original list was like this. I’ll show you the two proposals as well, okay?”

Original List: Yamanaka Castle, Takanosu Castle, Ashigara Castle, Nirayama Castle, Shimoda Castle.



Secretary’s Proposed List: “Selected based on the castle’s size and the presence of a lord.”

Yamanaka Castle, Nirayama Castle, Shimoda Castle.



Houjou’s Proposed List: “Selected based on Matsudaira’s involvement.”

Yamanaka Castle, Ashigara Castle, Takanosu Castle.

Gold Mar: “Wow, Yamanaka Castle sure is popular.”

Mal-Ga: “But what happens when this new proposal is applied to the supporting castle list?”

Bell: “Ah, U-Ujinao-san...is moving?”

Ujinao looked to the three castles on her list.

...I have spent a lot of time at those places.

For the history recreation, there really were buildings there. Some of them were not actually “castles”, but they were castles via interpretation.

They had currently been turned into tools to be cut away from Houjou in negotiation.

I have become rather sentimental, she thought as she spoke.

“First, those three.”

The number was no different from the Musashi Secretary’s number.

But the castles had been changed from large ones to small guard castles.

The smaller size made it look like the overall battle was shrinking.

But that was wrong.

...Time to prove why this is so different.

“Now for the remaining support castles and other castles.”

She applied the same filter.

“These are the ones Matsudaira is most involved with.”

- **Tsukui Castle, Tamanawa Castle, Edo Castle, Kogane Castle, Toke Castle, Usui Castle, Honsakura Castle, Iwatsuki Castle, Hachigata Castle.**

Ujinao reduced the list of castles, but their number was now...

“Nine. Including the previous three, that is twelve.”

It came down to that when based on Matsudaira’s involvement.

“Based on the rules of the history recreation, Matsudaira must defeat these castles. Now, what kind of duels should we use?”

There it is, thought Neshinbara.

“Let’s make this a war of words, Houjou Ujinao.”

He pointed at Ujinao’s sign frame.

“I won’t go so far as to call it lying, but you have a very biased view of things.”

“And what is that bias?”

“Judge.” Neshinbara nodded. “Think about it. Matsudaira and Houjou are not the only participants in the Siege of Odawara. Hashiba, the most powerful army of the warring states, is there too. ...So why are you forcing this destructive

history recreation onto Matsudaira alone?”

He pushed his glasses up with his right middle finger, used his hips to slide his body to the right, took a half step to the right, and hid his face behind his hand.

“Now, then.”

Mal-Ga: “...”

Azuma: “Eh? What was that?”

Gold Mar: “...”

Bell: “Eh? ...Eh?”

Flat Vassal: “Oh, Suzu-san, you’re confused by that meaningless action, aren’t you? Yeah, you wouldn’t have expected to sense that...”

Vice President: “Hey, Neshinbara.”

Novice: “What is it? I’m in the middle of cornering her.”

...Does he know what he’s doing...?

Masazumi felt a dull sweat. Because...

...He isn’t cornering her at all...

He had done nothing and presented no basis to suggest he was cornering her.

But how did that amateur author see the world? She felt like she needed to know that to ensure their safety later on, but alarm bells went off in her mind, telling her that would only show her a harsh reality.

What was happening?

But then Neshinbara struck a pose and spoke.

“I would like to say one thing.”

He used a snap of the wrist to swing the hand covering his face.

“If you must demand that we complete our dark history recreation, then you should do the same for Hashiba. Otherwise, your words are no more than

conceit-...contemptible lies.”

...Don't trip over your words!!

The Date Vice Chancellor must have thought the same thing because she silently glanced over at Urquiaga.

Urquiaga returned her glance and they both nodded.

That was the end of it.

...They sure are calm.

Maybe that was the Date Vice Chancellor's way of accustoming herself to things.

It also seemed like a form of resignation, but that was pretty much what it took.

However, this was not the time for them to be attacking their own. They had to wait for Houjou's response.

“Now.”

Neshinbara twisted his right arm while swinging it forward. Did he think he was building up power or something? Would this be okay?

Regardless, their Secretary took a breath and spoke.

“Are you prepared to demand Hashiba complete their history recreation?”

Masazumi mentally prepared herself for Ujinao's response.

It would be a rejection. There was no other option.

After all, Houjou's goal was the Kantou Liberation and Mouri was joining this battle to keep Hashiba from intervening. They would never do anything that actually allowed Hashiba to intervene.

...So what will she say?

Masazumi also had to keep an eye on how Neshinbara reacted to it.

...He's been acting oddly here...

Since Masazumi had remained calm, she would have to smooth things over afterwards. *Oh, these fried tomatoes are good with this sauce...*

Flat Vassal: “Vice President, is it just me or are you in spectator mode here?”

Tsukinowa: “Maa?”

Vice President: “Yes, Tsukinowa, it’s all right. Spectator, not dictator.”

Almost Everyone: “What have you been teaching that Mouse!?”

Don’t worry about it.

With an air of “anyway”, Houjou Ujinao looked up.

“I see.”

She added a “testament” and nodded.

Then she spoke.

“Now, let’s send that request to Hashiba.”

She has guts, thought someone in reference to Ujinao.

That someone was Mouri Terumoto.

She crossed her arms and gave a mental whistle.

...She sure is stubborn.

This was clearly a bluff.

Calling Hashiba would ruin everything.

This was not what that girl actually wanted.

But, thought Terumoto while biting the inside of her cheek.

...I’ll support you, Houjou.

With that thought, Terumoto raised her voice.

“Yeah, failure isn’t an option for you. ...I can see why you would make that decision.”

Masazumi did not turn toward Terumoto.

She knew the girl was only applying pressure.

...And that pressure is meaningless for Mouri...!

Masazumi had to wonder what she was thinking. After all, giving plausibility to Houjou's words would apply pressure to Musashi, but it did not benefit Mouri in any way.

She may have been responding to Ujinao's willpower.

But this was an international discussion and Terumoto was supporting another nation based on a personal feeling.

...And I doubt she gave any thought to how this will only get harder for me if I call her on it!

Uqui: "This is that whatever-you-call-it...pro wrestling."

10ZO: "You mean that competition where you attempt to get your opponent to use all of their techniques and power?"

Scarred: "Oh, you mean like Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra."

10ZO: "Ohh, Mary-dono. That would be the strong style."

I have no idea what any of that means.

"But," said Houjou. "We have a P.A. Oda group in our forces. We will have them contact Hashiba for us. Is that enough for you to accept my suggested *number of castles?*"

There it is, thought Masazumi. She looked to Neshinbara's back where he had moved to stand right in front of her.

...Should I step forward if it comes to it?

The Vice President had that authority.

Her position was higher than the Secretary's, so she could retract everything Neshinbara said as "some nonsense from the Secretary".

It would destroy Neshinbara's international reputation, but there was no helping that. He wrote weird novels and Shakespeare would do something

about it. It seemed fitting enough.

...But what will he do?

Masazumi looked past Neshinbara's back to Houjou Ujinao.

That horned automaton had dark skin and black hair. Her personality could only be called deep, but she was very direct when it came to going on the attack.

"What will you do?" asked Ujinao. "Shall we contact Hashiba?"

Masazumi heard someone respond to her request for confirmation.

It was Neshinbara.

With his back in front of Masazumi, he reacted to Ujinao's line.

"That's all wrong," he said. "Is that really something Houjou Ujinao would do?"

"Houjou Ujinao," said Neshinbara. "You are pushing us to fulfill our history recreation, correct?"

"Testament. The Siege of Odawara is a history recreation. Is there a problem with following that?"

"That settles it then."

Neshinbara swung his head once. Then he spread his right hand and clawed at the empty air.

He used that arm to stroke the area around his face.

"You cannot defeat me."

I've got this, he thought while opening a few sign frames by his hand.

...There's a lot to do, but I need to try whatever I can.

"Listen," he said while summoning a few more sign frames to himself. "I will now prove that you cannot defeat me."

“Huh...?”

A voice of confusion entered the sky of the construction site.

It came from Yoshiyasu who came to a stop on a suspension bridge.

The bright vermilion light kept her from seeing through the sign frame well, so she held it up to the setting sun to use that backlight to read the text.

It was a short piece of text, but...

“Wait just a second...!”

She scratched at her hair as a single bang of a hammer shook the air.

With sweat on her brow, she faced forward – to Musashino’s starboard.

“Please tell me you have the Vice President’s permission for this, Musashi Secretary!”

Neshinbara sensed Honda Masazumi moving behind him.

She seemed to be eating some fried fish with lemon, but he knew that was just for show.

She was opening a sign frame and contacting him. And on his instructions.

This was something he had set up in advance.

He had thought he would need it eventually, but he had not expected the need to arise so soon.

...At any rate, I’m counting on you.

Novice: “Work with me here. Can you do that?”

Vice President: “I kind of have to at this point.”

He did not apologize. Because this was necessary for victory.

...How nice.

Friendship, victory, and effort were composed of everything you had done in the past.

At this point, all they needed was a protagonist to guide them there.

...Sorry.

He lightly tapped the head of the Mouse floating in front of his eyes.

The Mouse that turned back in surprise was called Michizane.

Tenjin Michizane was a god of thunder and a god of literature. Even if the Mouse was only modeled after that being, in Far Eastern culture, a model could act in lieu of the real one.

Which was the proxy and which was the real one? While deciding that was a suitable theme for this meeting, Neshinbara spoke to Michizane.

“I’m sorry.”

I’m sorry that a guy like me is the protagonist here.

That was an insult to Michizane. But...

...Let’s go on the attack.

“Let us have a boring discussion about the history recreation,” said Neshinbara.

Ujinao listened to the Musashi Secretary’s voice.

“Houjou Ujinao has a few different history recreations to complete, correct?”

That was obvious.

Houjou was said to have conquered Kantou and Ujinao was a major daimyo of the Warring States period. She was involved in plenty of historical topics. However...

“The biggest turning point among those would be the Siege of Odawara and the related incidents.”

“What about it?”

The Musashi Secretary was probably trying to provoke her.

When she did not know what he was after, she only need ask. Also...

“You plan to list off a few of my decisions so you can find fault in them, don’t you?”

Her question had the ability to limit his response.

If he had no rebuttal, then she could say he was doing exactly that.

She threw those prodding words straight forward.

“Are you attempting to corner me by bringing up *the history surrounding my end?*”

She limited him further.

But those words received a response.

“That’s all wrong.”

Again.

He repeated the same words as before. And...

“Houjou Ujinao is a hard worker. ...Despite being lord of the Houjou clan, her father and his associates treated her like a puppet. And just as she thought she had escaped their bonds, the Siege of Odawara was right around the corner.”

“He’s got you there!” laughed her uncle, but she ignored it.

She could kill him at any time. And he was an ally, so there was no need to hold back. So she could ignore it.

But she was somewhat bothered by the words of the boy in front of her.

...*What a pain.*

She did not like having people talk about her.

No one understood all of the work she had done. Other than those who knew how it had all begun.

In that case, she thought.

“You act like you know what you are talking about.”

“Because I’ve read the history books,” he said while raising a hand to his face and dropping the index finger straight down for no apparent reason. “Don’t make me think you are merely doing a bad imitation of the history I love.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“It is time to measure you.”

On the other side, the Musashi Chancellor’s sister grabbed the Asama Shrine Representative’s breasts with both hands.

“Measure her!? Yes, measure her! And what better to measure than boobs!? See, I’m measuring you, Asama! Who was it that suggested this!? Because they’re a genius! You come here too, Mitotsudaira!”

“We are trying to have a meeting!”

Then shouldn’t you keep your voice down?

...But I do have to ask.

“Measure me how?”

The Musashi Secretary nodded.

“That is not for me to determine. ...I will merely make the connection.”

The darkness of night had already arrived in the depths of the forest.

To the back was a lake with an aerial ship landed in it. And to the front...

“Suwa Shrine.”

Noriki’s voice carried across a wide, illuminated staircase. And through the forest ahead, he could see a black roof reflecting the light of the setting sun.

If he crossed the large road in front of him, he would reach the shrine. However...

“Are they open this late?”

He stood on a wooden walkway on the lake side of the road and he looked back while pointing toward Suwa.

Hiro stood between him and the transport ship in the lake. She stood on the pier and was recording the scenery with a sign frame.

“They’re open until nine at night since a lot of people come from pretty far away. ...Oh, but you can’t spend the night in the shrine, so we’ll be sleeping on the transport ship.”

“What about food?”

“Come at the scheduled times and we’ll have something ready.”

“I appreciate it,” said Noriki as he walked toward the shrine.

Hiro laughed behind him.

“You sure are hasty! I’ll tell the others, but dinner is at seven, okay!?”

“For now, I’m only checking in, registering my spell project, and leaving January with them.”

Noriki held up the sign frame with the necessary contract written on it.

“Oh, and one other thing.”

“Eh? What is it?”

He lightly tapped the sign frame with his right hand, breaking it.

“I’m not hasty. I’m just acting tough to mask my reluctance.”

The shards of light scattered in front of his right hand as he pulled it back.

He continued forward without looking back at the light.

“As unsightly as it is, I want to maintain a connection.”

“Now, to make the connection,” said Neshinbara.

He spread his arms and summoned a sign frame to himself.

It had a hand-drawn decorative border and an emblem that would supposedly amplify dark powers. He had no idea if it worked, though. In fact, it would be pretty dangerous if it did. That was an important issue.

That emblem had the word “demon” written in dancing flames at the top and he was impressed with his own work there.

...This has got to work.

Although he honestly had no idea what “working” meant in this case. And...

“Houjou Ujinao.” He viewed his opponent past the sign frame and spoke to her. “According to the Testament, Houjou Ujinao actually contacted Hashiba

before the Siege of Odawara to correct a misunderstanding between himself and Hashiba.”

Houjou Ujinao’s expression was unchanged.

That lack of reaction brought a thought to Neshinbara’s mind:

...Her lack of reaction is a weapon.

But this has got to be a simple negotiation for her and for Crossdressing Honda-kun behind me.

Here, they would read each other’s atmosphere and speak the most appropriate words to strike a balance between them.

So he had to sense the meaning behind Houjou Ujinao’s lack of response or reaction and find a way to deal with it.

But he had trouble with that.

...What am I supposed to do at times like that?

He was up against a historical figure. He gave his response while aware he was pushing her to make a historical decision.

“But Hashiba had already moved to crush Houjou. Houjou Ujinao pleaded with Hashiba’s aide, but could not get through and sought someone else’s help instead.”

And that person was...

“Matsudaira Motonobu.”

Neshinbara raised a sign frame.

He kept his eyes on his opponent as he continued forming words.

“Houjou Ujinao sought Matsudaira’s help. He wanted them to intervene against Hashiba. But by then, Matsudaira had already joined with Hashiba and had agreed to prepare for the Siege of Odawara,” he explained. “Honestly, if they had had divine transmissions, the Siege of Odawara might never have happened.”

Neshinbara looked to his opponent.

He directly faced expressionless and wordless Houjou Ujinao and continued speaking.

“Now.”

He swung his right hand.

The sign frame moved along with his hand, but if he did not let it shake him, it would look like he had done it on purpose.

So that was what he did.

Then he slowly moved his hand back so no one would notice.

“If you do contact Hashiba now, you could not ask them to come here. You would have to tell them it was all a misunderstanding and beg them to stay away.” He pointed toward his feet with his left hand. “But that would not reach Hashiba. It must not reach them. ...Do you know what I mean?”

She remained silent, but he kept talking.

“Because that is the proper form of the history recreation.” He took a breath. “As you cannot call for Hashiba, you have no authority to speak when it comes to Hashiba. Do you remember my question: ‘Are you prepared to demand Hashiba completes their history recreation?’ But you cannot possibly be. You simply cannot. Which is why I say this: if Hashiba was involved with one of the castles, we cannot include it in the number of duels. In other words, this battle must be fought between Houjou and Matsudaira.”

Neshinbara swung his right hand while he spoke, this time while making sure the sign frame did not follow it. Relieved by that, he turned to the side in a new pose.

“We now have our number of castle duels: the three preliminary ones and three for the main battle as discussed before.”

- **Preliminary Battle: Yamanaka Castle, Nirayama Castle, Shimoda Castle.**
- **Main Battle: Matsuida Castle, Tsukui Castle, Hachigata Castle.**

“Add Odawara Castle itself to these six for a total of seven castles. ...That is the number of duels we shall fight.”

Houjou Ujinao responded to that.

Neshinbara gave that summer uniform girl a sharp look and she gave a quiet nod.

“Testament. Understood.”

Houjou Ujinao opened a sign frame.

“I will now contact Hashiba.”

Chapter 35: Absurdist at a Road Meeting

第三十五章

『路上会議の背理者』



それは過去からの遺産←何が？
豊穣の時を経て宿る←具体が無い
右手の疼きと痛み←施療院行け
配点（出番だ……）←僕もだよ。。。。

It is inherited from the past ← What is?

It resides within after times of prosperity ← Be more specific.

This throbbing and aching of my right hand ← Go see a doctor.

Point Allocation (It's my time to shine...) ← Mine too...

Masazumi could not react to what Houjou Ujinao said.

...She's going to contact Hashiba?

Houjou had said they would contact Hashiba.

But what were they going to do?

...That isn't following the rules of the history recreation!

Hadn't Houjou just finished saying they would follow those rules? Neshinbara had used that to trap Houjou using the history recreation. And yet...

“————”

She saw a raised right hand.

It was Neshinbara's.

It was a stopping gesture. He was telling her to stay quiet.

The sign frame followed his hand, but she was not sure if she should mention it. Or...

...Oh, I get it.

She knew what to say. And realizing how to choose her words, she spoke.

“Are we okay?”

Wise Sister: “In the head?”

Vice President: “In our situation here!”

But the right hand lowered.

Neshinbara straightened his back and looked directly at his opponent. And...

“Crossdressing Honda-kun. Sorry for worrying you.”

“What are you going to do?”

She was asking if he needed help. And he gave a small nod.

“Heh. ...For now, you should continue healing your wounds and gathering your power.”

Gold Mar: “...Huh? Seijun, when did you get wounded?”

Vice President: “That’s what I’d like to know...”

That was apparently the state of things in his head.

But anything he did here would be reckless. Because...

...We have no idea what she’s thinking.

Houjou had readily taken back what she had said before. She would silently accept any criticism of that fact, but she would act for her own benefit in the very next statement.

Novice: “Are you familiar with the Indian gods? Specifically, the wife of Shiva, one of their greatest gods.”

No, I am not. And what do you mean “one of” their greatest gods?

But the back in front of Masazumi calmly explained his thoughts.

Novice: “Shiva’s wife has two faces. She is normally a virtuous wife known as Parvati, but on the battlefield, she gains a cruel and bloodthirsty form and is known as Kali.”

Vice President: “So it’s the idea of the open and the hidden?”

Novice: “It’s the idea behind yoga.”

That just confuses me more. Meanwhile, the idiot and Crossunite were reacting: “India makes me think of that game company. Do you remember it, Tenzou? Y’know, the one that went ‘Yoga~’ on the ads. I think one of us had a Yoga Drive in middle school.”

“During elementary school, I remember Ohiroshiki-dono being all alone as the only one of us that had a Yoga Master System.”

“I stand by my decision! And now I have a Yoga Saturn!”

I understand none of this. I'll just take it to mean yoga is amazing. But...

Novice: "Our negotiation partner here is that kind of person."

Really? thought Masazumi as she searched for Kali on the divine network.

<Kali: Parvati's angry version. Cruel, sticks her tongue out, dances, and kills. Her dance destroys the earth, so her husband is forced to act as a platform below her. Thus, her husband is super strong.> It was a little concerning how the cheerful description was next to an India-ink painting of mass slaughter.

But it was true this opponent would silently change.

So Masazumi wondered what he would do.

...What are you planning, Neshinbara?

Then the back in front of her spoke.

"Why?" he asked Houjou Ujinao. "Why are you so intent on having your way?"

...Indeed.

Masazumi mentally agreed with Neshinbara's question.

And Houjou Ujinao reacted.

She opened her mouth, stopped, and...

"..."

She allowed a small smile in her eyes and on her lips.

Suzu had to calm her pulse.

...Eh?

What she had sensed in Houjou Ujinao had caused her to tremble.

Suzu could not see. She had to otherwise sense her surroundings and other people to live her life.

She of course could not sense emotions.

The other person's feelings were as imperceptible to her as colors and she

had at times felt that was a failing on her part. She had wondered why she was unable to sense anything extra to make up for her blindness. However...

...Nn.

At some point, she had been taught that she could sense the things that emotions cause. She could sense their breaths, their heat, the movements of their face, and sometimes even their pulse or other slight movements betraying their feelings.

At the moment, she had sensed two emotions.

The first came from Houjou Ujinao.

It was a small emotion.

It was truly as subtle as the corners of her mouth rising a bit.

But the exact opposite reached Suzu from everyone else.

“————”

They trembled.

That was an emotion of fear, caution, and alertness.

But Suzu had a thought.

...What does...that mean?

Everyone was holding their breath. Even Terumoto held her breath as she faced the situation.

...What does this mean...?

Because...

...Ujinao-san is...happy?

There was no cruel emotion there. There was nothing worthy of guilt. It was the same smile as a child returning home after wearing themselves out playing.

With that smile on her face, she simply relaxed her body.

“...”

And she hung her head a bit with the smile still in the corners of her lips and

eyes.

It was as if she were hiding tears of joy.

...Um.

For some reason, Suzu considered calling out to her.

What is it?

Did something make you happy?

...Or...

Suzu thought, *Did something unpleasant go away?*

A moment later, Ujinao spoke.

“I will contact Hashiba.”

Her voice hid a smile within. There was no threat, hesitation, or darkness in it. She sent them her words as casually as someone taking an order.

“You are okay with that, I assume?”

Suzu just about said yes, but...

“That isn’t possible.”

She shrank back when she heard Neshinbara’s voice.

...Whoops.

Unlike with Date, she was not the negotiator here.

And Suzu heard a smiling voice. It was Houjou Ujinao and she sounded delighted.

“Not possible?”

She would be the one to contact Hashiba.

And she gave her opinion of the matter.

“I believe it would be quite possible.”

Masazumi sensed danger.

...She's desperate.

She had read Houjou's strategy. And she was confident in her reading.

...She isn't afraid of anything.

Houjou Ujinao was not afraid of the history recreation, of the Testament Union, of their own destiny, or of Hashiba.

But *only if she got her way in the end*. Because...

"That's right, that's right! That's exactly right, Ujinao! ...Houjou has to have its way in the end!" The automaton uncle nodded behind her. And white smoke rose from his ears as he did so. "We already know we'll be destroyed, so we have nothing to fear. We lose nothing even if we fail in this negotiation. Yes, nothing at all!!!!"

Ujiteru's tone begged the other side to understand. And Genan, the hooded long-lived next to him, also nodded. He ate a soy flour dumpling skewer as he spoke.

"Of course, let's not forget that we indulged in all the profit we could until now. But if we do not fear looking bad, we don't have to worry about giving ourselves 'a beautiful ending'," he said. "Because we want to live on even after that ending."

His head was not lowered in shame. He lifted his jaw a bit and looked directly at Masazumi.

"You too will live on after that. ...You have the luxury of having no end in sight, so I doubt you can understand our impatience, resignation, and struggle. And even if you did show such things, we would only take advantage of it and suck you dry," he said. "I mean, you know the Pretas? Those come from India."

Genan laughed and his body shook.

"We cannot go with you. Houjou is ending. Unlike Satomi, Date, or Uesugi. Houjou rules over 8 nations in southern Kantou, and yet it will be gone before Sekigahara."

Meaning...

"This meeting you are holding here? You could say it is a waste of time for us.

That is how we see it.”

Probably so, thought Masazumi.

There was one way in which Houjou was different from any of the other nations they had faced.

This nation would disappear before long.

Houjou would go away after the Siege of Odawara. This meeting was meant to define what that battle meant.

...This is a lot of trouble.

Realizing just how desperate Houjou was explained why they were so insistent on the number of castles.

To Ujinao, the number of castles was more than just a number.

It was the people who lived there and supported it and it was the history there.

In this meeting, she had to measure just how much meaning that held and reach some kind of result.

Ujinao had to show off Houjou’s history and value to the people of those 8 nations they ruled.

This was a great settlement of the nation of Houjou.

It was the greatest job given to her as Houjou’s final ruler.

...In that case...

Masazumi had a thought.

If she wants the Kantou Liberation, it means she is looking past their ending.

...This is not good.

Masazumi could tell she was worrying.

Until now – and that included the meeting earlier in the day and the discussion at IZUMO – she had assumed Houjou was facing their fate in a more rational manner.

She had thought that was why they advocated the Kantou Liberation and proposed working with Musashi.

But that was not the case.

And this explained some things. For example...

“————”

That was why they had invited Mouri to Kantou.

That was why they had brought in Takigawa and her group from P.A. Oda.

And *that* was why they were using those others to wage war against Musashi.

If the Kantou Liberation was their goal, they could simply do what Musashi wanted.

So why were they using force to take an antagonistic stance?

Mouri wanted Matsudaira's authority, but Houjou was different.

...I screwed up.

Why had she thought only Mouri had that kind of desire?

Houjou was the same.

To put it another way, the term “Kantou Liberation” had caused her to misjudge Houjou's intentions. Also...

...Oh, no!

The problem was who their current negotiator was: Neshinbara.

He had stepped forward to compete with Ujinao over numbers. He was here to use his historical knowledge to debate with Houjou over the number of castles.

But the meeting was headed in a different direction.

The number of castles and the debate thereof was only for show.

“Hey.”

Masazumi prepared to call out to Neshinbara, but she heard a smiling voice.

“There is a way to contact Hashiba.”

Ujinao kept Masazumi from saying anything.

“We only have to contact them through P.A. Oda’s Takigawa.”

Terumoto was impressed by the words Houjou pretty much threw out there.

...So that’s it.

That was it.

Houjou had taken in Takigawa for more than a boost to their fighting force.

She was a contact point.

Roles like that were almost never useful in an age of divine transmissions.

But there were times when it became relevant between nations: when a nation *had to cover its eyes or ears* for political, wartime, or history recreation reasons.

At times like that, a contact point could use their political power or their skill to break through the restriction.

To Houjou, Takigawa could play that role. However...

“That won’t work,” slowly stated Musashi’s Secretary. “Takigawa was besieged within Kanie Castle and Hashiba aid never did arrive. Hashiba will not come here even if you ask for aid via Takigawa.”

He sealed that away.

The Musashi Secretary had sealed Houjou’s action with those words. And as part of the history recreation.

But Terumoto had a thought.

...You idiot. That’s not the point.

He did not understand. Unfortunately, he still did not understand.

Houjou was not that kind of person right now.

...Reason isn’t going to get through to her.

And Ujinao’s next words seemed to be in agreement.

“You say aid will not arrive for Kanie Castle?”

“Indeed. No assistance comes for Takigawa. That is why she must hole up in the castle.”

“I see,” Ujinao nodded. “But they might arrive for the Siege of Odawara. Because we are combining the Sieges of Kanie Castle and Odawara. That allows Hashiba to view it as either one they like. ...If they cannot send aid to Kanie Castle, they can send warriors to ‘invade’ Odawara. That is a perfectly legitimate interpretation.”

That’s so forceful...! thought Neshinbara.

Everyone had two sides to themselves. At the moment, Houjou Ujinao remained calm on the surface while making full use of her aggressive side.

But even so, this was forceful.

It was not reasonable.

No. If he tried to restrict Houjou with reason right now, she would use a forceful argument that outdid his reason. And she would base it on a part of their preparations.

This was the same.

He was only talking about the people here, but she used the P.A. Oda forces assisting her in order to bring Hashiba’s actions into the argument.

Even though other nations were irrelevant here.

That was not done in international meetings.

Most likely, began Neshinbara.

...She is treating this like an actual argument in her mind.

She was using false evidence.

She was taking speculation that she was fairly certain of and treating it like fact. Speculation was no more than speculation and the argument was only valid to her, but *by believing it with no doubt in her mind* she turned it into “fact”.

Even if there was no proof and even if it was not actually true, if she believed in it, it was a “fact”.

The real trouble with an opponent who used this was that no amount of proving it wrong would ever get through to them.

To them, it was an “indisputable fact”, so it did not matter to them if it was actually entirely groundless. In fact, they would start to act like you were using lies in an attempt to reject their “fact”.

That put him at a disadvantage.

He understood her, he knew what tactic she was using, and he was aware it was a war of words.

But...

...I'm sane.

She was blinded by her belief in herself.

That was a madness that led her to look only at herself and determine everything based on what she found inside herself.

“D...”

...Dammit.

Neshinbara felt like he was reaching into a pile of needles as he began speaking.

“On what basis do you say Hashiba will send any warriors here?”

“Takigawa is an important upperclassman to Hashiba. Hashiba would not abandon her.”

“On what basis do you say Hashiba would not abandon her?”

He kept up the attack.

He asked further question to pursue the basis of this belief. And Houjou responded with a smile as usual.

“Then why do you think Hashiba would abandon her?”

“—————”

She had outdone him.

Neshinbara briefly felt like his feet had been swept out from under him, but he held his ground.

No, he really had been figuratively tripped.

A brief flash of pure anger entered his heart.

He knew exactly what Houjou had meant with her statement.

She fully believed that Hashiba would not abandon Takigawa. It was a groundless assumption to him, but it was not for her.

So when he questioned her, she had asked for proof.

She wanted a basis for his claim that Hashiba would abandon Takigawa. And if he could not produce it, it would mean Hashiba would not abandon Takigawa. But...

...That's not the issue!

He wanted to ask her to prove her claim first, but she believed in herself. The problem was that she also doubted him.

Houjou continued smiling at him.

“Now, give me your reason.”

It was ridiculous.

She had probably forgotten that she had no reason either.

And she knew perfectly well that he could not give a reason.

She conveniently attacked others without taking her own mistake into account. And on top of that...

...Is she trying to say she's right just because I've made a mistake?

It sounded reasonable, but it was wrong.

One side being wrong did not make the other side right.

But that logic would not get through to her.

“You cannot give a reason, can you?”

“No, that isn’t the point.”

“Are you trying to dodge the issue? ...You hound me with baseless accusations yet you dodge the issue and escape when I make some pointed criticism?”

“That’s...”

“Why will you not answer my question?”

Neshinbara decided his response to her question was his chance to counterattack.

“I asked a question first. I asked if you had any basis for your statement! Please stop using that to attack me!”

“What are you talking about?” There was delight in the words that spilled from her smiling mouth. “You are in the position of power here. You are the future rulers of Matsudaira and you have the Musashi. You have all that and yet you can’t answer a simple question from some people who are doomed to fall? You must know and understand so much more than us. If anyone is obliged to answer, it is you, not us.”

...Kh!

Neshinbara just about called her insane, but stopped himself.

Calm down.

I’m used to dealing with the insane thanks to our class. It’s pretty much everyone, including our teacher. Oh, but not Mukai-kun. Still, why should I feel threatened just because there’s one more weird person in the world around me?

But you normally can’t let crazy people participate in a meeting like this.

We would be justified in calling off this meeting altogether. But...

Silver Wolf: “This is a real pain when she can use the Kantou Liberation as a shield...”

Exactly.

Besides, this was meant to be the battle leading into the Kantou Liberation, so weren’t they supposed to be negotiating it out so both sides avoided any real

damage in the duels?

They had strayed from that and were really getting into the weeds.

Marube-ya: “Neshinbara-kun can’t beat that girl logic, can he?”

Mal-Ga: “A girl in his position would probably have physically attacked her by now.”

Gold Mar: “Should we shoot her?”

...You can’t do that!

But what was he supposed to do?

He had been completely trapped in a deep and narrow position and she was using that as a chance to attack.

If he could not answer her question, she was sure to claim it proved her point.

...And in that case...

He felt like he had seen a similar situation before.

What was it? he wondered.

“Wait!”

Just then, Honda Masazumi’s voice rang out behind him.

“Wait!”

Ujinao heard the Musashi Vice President’s voice.

“Houjou is currently speaking on behalf of Hashiba! But does Houjou hold the authority to do that!? If Hashiba has not asked you to represent them here, your statements are invalid!”

“My apologies.”

Needless to say, Hashiba had asked for nothing of the sort.

Ujinao nodded toward the Musashi Vice President and spoke.

“So I take it you are the negotiator.”

Because...

“I had thought your Secretary was speaking on your behalf, but it would seem not. At least based on what you just said. So which is it?”

“—————”

She restricted the girl.

...Musashi Vice President, you are an honest person.

You excel at directly approaching your opponent and keeping them in your sights the entire time.

But, thought Ujinao.

...You have trouble in negotiations that require clinging to and devouring your opponent while constantly attacking any openings.

So Ujinao worked to restrict the girl’s actions.

“If you will step forward, I will ignore everything he has said.”

Now.

“What will it be?”

...Now she’s done it!

Masazumi braced herself against Ujinao’s provocation.

Houjou had essentially taken Neshinbara hostage.

She had told Masazumi to step forward.

But doing that to gain what Musashi wanted would invalidate Neshinbara’s authority.

Responding here would mean they could never again use their Secretary on the international political stage.

She could not make that decision.

Deep down, she really wanted to respond to Houjou.

She wanted to step forward and gain a fresh start.

But she could not.

If she did, Neshinbara would lose all authority to speak for Musashi.

No, deep down, she was kind of okay with that too.

Mal-Ga: “How about you try going along with it and firing Neshinbara to see if it increases the value of his doujinshi novels?”

Gold Mar: “Wouldn’t it make them *less* valuable?”

Marube-ya: “That was close. I was about to start buying them up!”

They sure are harsh. But...

...Huh?

Masazumi realized that Houjou’s provocation did not actually work as provocation.

Suzu sensed Masazumi move.

...Huh?

It was a sudden movement.

Without warning, she brought a hand to her face while also trying to say something.

No, she was hiding her face because she just about said something without thinking.

...Wh-what?

I probably shouldn’t listen to that, thought Suzu despite focusing her ears.

And a certain noise reached her sense of hearing.

“Wow...”

It was a sound of surprise, like Masazumi had just realized something.

It was a breath indicating she had realized something that she had overlooked until now.

And she spoke.

“Neshinbara. You are the best for the job.”

Then Suzu turned toward Neshinbara.

...Ah.

A new sign frame had appeared by his left hand.

Her senses told her it was for a divine transmission, but...

...From who?

No, she knew who it was.

It was him.

Me: “Hey, I’m cooking pasta so I can’t see what’s going on out there.”

He spoke.

Me: “But this person isn’t as much of a pain as that...Shakespeare, was it? Right?”

Neshinbara wordlessly moved his hands.

He nodded at the Chancellor’s words and formed words on another sign frame.

He sent them to England – to the person he could call his nemesis.

“How are you doing?” he asked.

He sent the message.

Asama received it, confirmed an individual deactivation of the barrier, and sent it on to England.

The reply was almost immediate.

It was her.

The text was short:

“Come here.”

“I don’t want you to feel indebted to me, Toussaint. This was payback for when you stole *Aspida Phylargia* from me.”

She looked up into the evening sky and smiled bitterly atop a rooftop overlooking the Thames.

“Never before have I put on an act so obviously contrary to my thoughts.”

She added an “honestly” while opening a book in the air. Waterproofing and dustproofing spells shined as emblems on the cover. And as she looked at it...

“And knowing that *this act will get through to you* is my misfortune and my fortune. I need to cool my head.”

With that, she fell backwards to drop herself into the Thames below.

Neshinbara smiled bitterly in his heart.

There were two words by his left hand. It was a very blunt expression.

That isn’t like her at all.

If anything, it’s more like my writing. When I write, I take it a step at a time while carefully confirming what I’m doing, what I’m writing, and whether it’s right or not.

That’s how she has written “come here”.

Should I do it?

But you’ve already come this way. If you want me to come, then say it with your own writing. Show me what kind of writing I’ll find there and ask if that’s where I want to go. But...

...Oh, damn.

I can immediately tell what kind of setup this is, and that’s my misfortune and a giant pain.

She doesn’t read the atmosphere like Aoi-kun does, so she really throws me off.

But my situation must look pretty bad to her.

Of course, that was just a type of act. She's using her act to suggest I escape from my way of doing things and approach her way.

In that case, thought Neshinbara.

It's time to redo this. Redo all of it.

Redo what? Myself. Not the negotiation.

The negotiation is already underway and there's no going back. But...

...There's no way I can do that, you idiot!

She only said that because she knows there's no way I can do things her way.

So that means she thinks I can win this. She's confident I will win and stay on my own path.

Do things her way and I just know she'll cut off all contact.

It would mean more than a simple "that was too bad, wasn't it?" We could not just lick each other's wounds. Because we are our own unique people in our journeys as authors.

If I lose and use her methods, I won't find comfort from her. I'll find disappointment. If I lose, I need to be prepared to stay on my own path and re-raise my flag at some point.

"...Yes."

This is a pain.

This really is a pain.

This just confirms what Aoi-kun said.

Yes, indeed. If I lose to Houjou here, I can just say "whelp, I lost!" Well, it might be worse than that, but that's not the issue here. I can easily predict that Schwarz Hexen and the others would actively sully the name of my shining holy life, but that is a different issue.

...If I lose here, Houjou will not be disappointed in me and I can still redo myself.

But she is different.

Thinking too deeply about this could tell her just how much of a threat I see her as, but I am a Musashi resident.

And...

...We screw up like this all the time.

No matter what happens, I will never dethrone Crossunite-kun at the top of the divine network search rankings.

What does it matter if I kill my international reputation? I've already killed my reputation within Musashi and I've started to get used to how the automatons say "What are you doing here, Neshinbara-sama? Over." when I arrive on the bridge. Humans can adapt.

Besides, I already did that in the first half of the battle on the way to England.

I can handle a blow to my reputation with ease.

It's just another point on the journey.

...So I know what to say about the current situation and circumstances: I have already passed by Houjou Ujinao on my journey.

So...

"Crossdressing Honda-kun."

I am stronger than I was at England. You could call me Powered Neshinbara... no, Advanced Neshinbara.

So I can say this.

"I am indeed the best for the job."

Suzu sensed Neshinbara raising his left hand.

His summer uniform had short-sleeves, but he oddly still moved as if rolling up his sleeves.

"Houjou Ujinao," he said. "It is time I got serious. About this negotiation."

"Will you answer my question?"

Neshinbara spread his left hand's fingers.

“The truth is...I am left-handed.”

Mal-Ga: “Huh? So do I have to mirror-image all of the drawings I’ve made?”

Gold Mar: “N-no, this is news to me. He’s never said it before.”

Worshiper: “During elementary school, he fell from the horizontal bar and dislocated his right shoulder, but he had trouble writing with his left hand.”

Asama: “And isn’t it a complete non-sequitur?”

“Heh heh,” quietly breathed Neshinbara.

He knew that had to have been a shock.

And he was not lying. After all, he was currently typing with both hands. And if he was ambidextrous, then he carried left-handedness inside him.

...Also...

He reset all of the sign frames following his right hand so they were in front of his eyes.

He stopped viewing Houjou Ujinao and viewed the text in front of him.

“Have you caught on?”

While floating in the river, Shakespeare smiled at the lack of a response from her act.

“If you have, then hurry up and show us your own words, Toussaint. We are authors. An author might view the readers’ words, but they must not focus on them. Do that and the author is trapped by the readers’ ideas.

“It is when we think we have captured our readers that they have captured us.

“So instead, view your readers’ words and then betray them, Toussaint. She has given you the hint you need. She has essentially said, ‘It would be incredible if you overcame this.’ At that point, no one can define whether or not it is truly

a betrayal. As long as your creation is entertaining, it can continue. That is why we can bet all of ourselves on the quality of what we create. That is all it is.”

Shakespeare’s smile grew.

“Hurry up and ‘come here’, Toussaint. It’s fun here.”

Just as she said that, she realized her body was shaking.

“Ah, what’s this?”

The bottom of the river had bumped into her flowing butt.

She was more lying down than sitting as she got up on the riverside.

She heard a distant voice calling to her from the opposite bank, so she waved back and pushed up her glasses.

“Oh, it’s already shallow enough to stand.”

Suzu focused on Neshinbara’s back.

...Is he...okay?

He had to be okay. No, it was not Neshinbara as a whole she was worried about.

...He hasn’t...gone crazy, has he?

She was embarrassed for thinking that.

She was not sure this counted as trusting in her friends. Or maybe she was wondering this specifically because she trusted them.

“ ...”

I have not been a very good girl lately, she thought.

“Now.”

Neshinbara cracked his neck and shoulders.

He could see Suzu moving behind him.

After all, his sign frames had a mirror function. He needed a way to make sure

he looked good when striking a pose.

So he saw her blushing and taking a half step back.

...Was she thinking of cheering me on?

She must have been, he thought with a sigh in his heart.

Yes.

Everyone here is rooting for me. I can see the nameless masses doing so on the divine network: "That bastard pushed Suzu-san away!"

"You don't do that... You just don't..."

"Boss, whaddya say we do about him?"

That confirms it.

...My popularity is rising...

I will be first in the search rankings before long. Crossunite-kun had the top 8 all to himself, but I just worked my way up to #3.

Indeed.

I learned this in England.

This kind of backlash is nothing compared to Shakespeare.

After experiencing that fear, this is like being a guest of honor.

...This feels nice.

He had thought the same thing over and over again.

He had all throughout this negotiation.

He had to continue negotiating even if he screwed up here and there.

So feeling he had lost was a mistake.

He had to enjoy this.

He could never keep it up otherwise.

He had to stay in high spirits. That too he had learned in England. Even if the thoughts swirling through his mind got him down, he always had the path of an author to return to.

It did not matter how often he felt despair or wallowed in dark and destructive feelings.

...I just have to solve everything in high spirits.

So, he thought.

“A selfish goddess stands before me.”

...In RPGs, Kali is a major mid-boss.

The Dunhi would apparently send the occasional protest to the game makers saying, “Please stop this or you really will get cursed. You will make her dance.” But the game makers would generally respond by saying, “This boss is an Indian curry spirit. The name might look similar^[4], but it is not Kali.” They had even gone as far as to make Kali yellow instead of blue, so there probably was not a problem.

I used her in a lot of my novels too.

He now viewed Houjou Ujinao as that goddess from her land.

“...Let’s do this.” He raised his left hand. “Let’s bring the number of castles down to 3.”

...That idiot...!!

Masazumi felt a great weight hit the pit of her stomach.

She knew it had to be a sign of stress. But...

Asama: “Huh? He’s reducing the number first?”

Exactly.

They were negotiating over the number of castles. And that meant he could use a method they had seen before.

Marube-ya: “Isn’t this the same as when Shiro-kun negotiated with Lord Howard in England? You know, where both sides make an initial proposal and then work towards a compromise.”

Sticky King: “Remind me: How did it go back then?”

Obscene: “Judge! I believe he was driven into a corner and had to unleash a prostration! And then...was there any more to it? Ha ha ha.”

Did that incubus only remember the most impactful part?

But there had been more.

Worshiper: “Yes. After that, Prostration Master Bertoni-kun rapidly reduced the number of days.”

Hori-ko: “Then what is Neshinbara-sama’s strategy if he is reducing the number right away?”

Novice: “Eh? I only did it because I thought it was what Bertoni-kun did.”

Almost Everyone: “You idiot!!”

Novice: “Wh-why am I an idiot? This is a winning strategy, isn’t it? And I do have a reason for choosing 3! I’ll explain later, so just trust me!”

Everyone looked Masazumi’s way.

She had the right to speak. This was out of respect to the office of Vice President. However...

...Oh, whoops.

She had already said the moron in front of her was best for the job.

That meant she was responsible for appointing him. Thus...

Vice President: “Hey, Neshinbara? I, uh, trust you in this, okay? Okay!?”

She did not trust in her own trust of him, so she did not sound terribly convincing.

However, the amateur author did not let it get to him. He mimed rolling up his sleeves again.

Novice: “Well, just watch. Didn’t I say this is a war of words? I will work with this 3-castle battle proposal and reveal the mystery of why I chose that number, so look forward to it.” He scratched at the air with his left fingers and hid his face behind the hand. “Three. I will end this with that number.”

Chapter 36: Divider of the Future

第三十六章

『未来の区切り手』



女の涙は武器である
そのことを証明せよ
配点（止められないから）

A woman's tears are a weapon

Prove it

Point Allocation (I Can't Be Stopped)

"You want to argue for three castles?"

Houjou Ujinao felt her smile grow.

...Oh?

She thought she had cornered him, suppressed him, and beaten him down, but the enemy was still putting up a fight.

She could see the facts and the world was following her vision.

Yes, this was Houjou land which would be flooded and cut off from the outside world.

And she was the Houjou leader who would be made into a puppet by her powerful relatives and similarly cut off from the outside world.

What did those two things cause when combined?

...Houjou has been cut off, so it can only be crushed and destroyed.

There was nothing to fear now.

They would disappear regardless, so she decided to take as much as she could, earn the best reputation she could, and give as much back to her people as she could.

So she thought she had grabbed at and dragged down her enemy. But...

"Three castles?" she asked. "That's odd. I believe I calculated the number of castles to around 12."

"It's 3. I'll explain why later," said the enemy from beyond his sign frame. "But 3 is enough."

"You are saying I can contact Hashiba, aren't you?"

If he said yes, she would immediately contact them.

She had no intention of making threats.

Threats or not, this was the end for Houjou. So she would have her way with no thought for the consequences. And so she raised a sign frame in her right hand.

She waited for the Musashi Secretary to speak.

She would settle this here depending on what he said. So...

...Our end may be something I create right here.

She sucked in a breath to prepare herself.

And then he gave his answer.

"I do not recall saying anything of the sort."

His voice reached her from beyond his sign frame.

"Do that and I will declare it a decision made by Houjou and Houjou alone. And Musashi will begin the Siege of Odawara right here and now. Keep that in mind."

Ujinao's smile was gone.

...What is this?

What was with this opponent?

Houjou was the victim, the defeated, and the loser.

...And yet he ignores everything I'm saying to criticize us?

This was their end. Surely they could be free to do as they wished at the very end.

They could selfishly make so many of their wishes come true. Surely they could be allowed that once in their lives. But...

"Are you trying to restrict us?"

"I do not recall saying anything of the sort."

"But you are reducing the number of castles to 3, are you not?"

“Of course,” declared the enemy beyond his sign frame. “We are the future victors. We have no reason to do what past losers like you say. And if we did do it...”

Then...

“It would be a favor. That is all, Houjou. Why are you relying on that and mistaking what this is all about?”

Neshinbara saw Houjou Ujinao directly face him.

But that was beyond the lines of text on his sign frame.

...She directly faced me.

He could describe everything about Houjou Ujinao.

So there was nothing to feel afraid or intimidated about. Even a Warring States daimyo like her was only a character within his text.

And Ujinao formed words.

“You are arrogant, aren’t you?”

“I do not recall thinking anything of the sort.”

Neshinbara rejected everything about his opponent.

He completely cut her off. This was his surefire method of winning this “negotiation”.

His opponent was desperately trying to drag him into her world by defining his argument for him. By ending her statements with “aren’t you?” or otherwise phrasing them as questions, a lack of a response would be taken as confirmation.

He was not going to go along with that.

He would respond, but he would make it clear that was not the case and cut her off by countering each and every one. That was crucial.

And then he would get his own words through.

“Three castles,” he said.

Ujinao shook her head and spoke.

“I do not recall approving anything of the sort.”

Was she copying him? That was perfect.

“We don’t need your approval.”

Because...

“We are the victors and you are the losers. The losers must obey the victors. So we will acquire the future we want whether we negotiate or not.”

“...Are you saying you will take it from us?”

“I do not recall saying anything of the sort.” Neshinbara typed in the words with his left hand. “You will be destroyed. We will watch it happen and retrieve what you left behind.”

“...Do the rulers of the Far East enjoy scrounging through corpses?”

“I do not recall saying anything of the sort,” said Neshinbara before saying more. “Besides, the dead won’t mind.”

“...Who do you think you are?”

“The victors.” He spoke to Ujinao through his sign frame’s text. “The victors who do not fear being the victors.”

“Even though you enjoy scrounging through corpses?”

“That’s twice.”

Ujinao frowned at the number he gave. But...

“...Huh?”

She did not realize what he meant.

...That’s convenient for me.

“We do not care what the dead say. We will ensure that the living inherit and use what the dead leave behind.”

“Doesn’t that make you no more than a usurper?”

Nice, thought Neshinbara.

...I was a usurper in England too.

I was Macbeth.

I was the usurper of the throne. Did that curse become a divine protection when it was purified?

That happens a lot in old Far Eastern stories. Like washing and taking care of a dirty wanderer and finding out they were actually a god. Or having a stranger leave you with a corpse, but after sheltering it for a night, it turns into solid gold.

Impure artifacts become something good when you purify them by caring for them.

If that was true...

...Shakespeare gave me an excellent curse.

I am a usurper. I am Macbeth, who can kill a king.

And I know which king I must kill.

Novice: "Aoi-kun."

Me: "Ah? What is it? Do you want some of the wasabi pasta I'm cooking?"

Novice: "That sounds great. But listen a moment."

Me: "Yeah?"

Yes.

Novice: "My purification in England is finally complete."

I am something good now. I will not try to kill my king.

So...

"I do not recall calling us usurpers."

What did Macbeth call himself after taking the throne?

"We have a king."

He had heard these words long ago and carved them into his memory.

"We are those who accompany our king."

"The greedy corpse scroungers would lift up a king!?"

“Three times.”

...That should be enough.

Neshinbara took a breath and raised his right hand. He pointed to a few spots in his sign frame text and showed them to Houjou Ujinao.

And he slowly explained.

“Three times you have referred to yourself as corpses or the dead.”

So...

“I won’t let you say you don’t recall. ...You are of the dead, Houjou Ujinao. You are forbidden to speak in the world of the living.”

“That is nonsense...!”

Neshinbara had an immediate response for Houjou Ujinao’s protest.

“Then shielding yourself with your status as the dead is equally nonsense, Houjou Ujinao.”

“Are you trying to restrict my speech!?”

“Saying that only rejects everything you have said to restrict us, Houjou Ujinao.”

“Do you think this quibbling counts as a win!?”

“Then we can’t accept any of the advantages you won through quibbling, Houjou Ujinao.”

“Logic, logic, logic! Do you think this is all running on logic!?”

“Then let us forget all about your logic, Houjou Ujinao.”

“Do you want me to call off this entire negotiation about the duels!?”

“Then,” said Neshinbara. “There will be no agreement over the number of castles, Houjou Ujinao.”

And...

“You have just abandoned the one bargaining chip you had against the

victors. ...Houjou Ujinao.”

Neshinbara took a deep breath in his heart.

That statement returned them to the castle count and also reset everything.

He had finally brought it all back.

He had worked his way into her argument and rewound it.

...I couldn't figure it out just from listening!

He had only been able to build up the order of words after lining them up in text.

Just how abnormal was Honda Masazumi for being able to do that with no assistance?

But, he thought.

...It begins here.

He was not done.

His turn to attack had only just begun.

“...!”

He swung his right hand.

“Release right hand...!”

Typing with both hands now, he sent his lines streaming across his sign frame. And...

“Three castles.”

He then added a “no”.

He took a breath to pause for a few seconds and then slowly spoke.

“A nation of the dead needs no castles. ...Do as we say, Houjou.”

“...You victors!”

Masazumi saw Ujinao shout with eyebrows raised.

“This is the arrogance of the victors...!”

...Wow.

She had seen Houjou Ujinao a few times before.

She had first met her at IZUMO and then again this afternoon.

But this was her first time seeing her reveal her emotions so clearly.

“What you want is to crush Houjou’s dignity!”

“You attempted a negotiation predicated on your death and you failed. You were prepared for the risks, weren’t you?”

“You say I was risking *this*...!?”

“Not just this,” said Neshinbara. “We will have Houjou crushed. ...But as per the Testament, Matsudaira will then manage the former Houjou land. How about that? The people of your territories will lose Houjou, who they knew could vanish at any moment, and be instead ruled by Matsudaira, rulers of the entire Far East.”

So...

“It would put your people at ease if Houjou were crushed and gave authority to us sooner rather than later.”

And...

“All of your people will say things are so much better than during the Houjou era.”

Ujinao wondered if there was any way to strike down her opponent’s argument.

There was.

He had acted rudely toward another nation’s Chancellor and Student Council President.

That was reason enough to strike him down on the spot.

And was it possible he had said that in order to get her to draw her sword here?

Then attacking him was perfectly acceptable. It was what he wanted.

Yes. She realized that no one would normally make that kind of provocation at a meeting. That meant he had said that so she would strike him down.

What other reason could there be?

...None whatsoever.

Ujinao decided she could strike him down, so...

“———”

She made her move. But just as she did...

“Oh, so the dead can move?” The Musashi Secretary swung his right hand and struck a pose. “What a strange nation Houjou is.”

Ujinao saw an opening in those words.

She saw the logic she needed to turn this around.

This will work, realized Houjou Ujinao.

She could still figuratively grab him by his collar. She could then knock him over and bring him down.

...Oh?

Heat wavered in her heart. What was meant to head straight out and roast her opponent instead wavered as if enveloping him.

Ujinao lightly shook the fire in her heart and sent it toward the Musashi Secretary.

“It is a strange nation.”

It really was.

“The dead can move in Houjou. My uncle here, the others, and I are doomed to destruction.”

So...

“Even the dead have the right to speak.”

...What a childish argument...

Mitotsudaira was half exasperated and half impressed.

She honestly thought Houjou Ujinao was incredible. Because...

...She instantly outdid our Secretary.

Class Plum’s best negotiator and orator would have to be Masazumi. Mitotsudaira wanted to say it was her king, but she knew that was favoritism speaking. Kimi did not count since she seemed to speak using something other than words.

But the Secretary was another special case.

Silver Wolf: “Yes, the Secretary’s argument is entirely hopeless and it must feel silly to play along with it.”

Gold Mar: “It’s kind of amazing that Nori’s wife is facing it head on.”

Novice: “What’s that supposed to mean!? We’re in the middle of a fiery debate!”

The two participants were probably the only ones who thought that.

Mitotsudaira glanced to the side and saw Horizon sweating while she clenched her fists with a serious look on her face. A closer look showed she had soy sauce flavored popcorn on the table in front of her.

“...”

Mitotsudaira decided to pretend she had not seen that.

...But what do we do now?

After forcibly defining themselves as the dead, Houjou Ujinao had been forcibly driven from the debate stage, but then she had forcibly recovered by forcibly accepting that hers was a nation of the dead. *I’m overusing the word “forcibly”, but I don’t know any other way of describing it.*

Meanwhile, Ujinao straightened her posture and took a breath.

“So you say there are only 3 castles?”

She returned to her method of debate by constant questioning.

And the Secretary frowned and swung his right hand.

“I have no intention of giving the dead the right to speak.”

“This is a negotiation,” said Houjou Ujinao. “You do not get to decide the rules.”

Terumoto took a light half-step back.

...Wait, wait. So do you make the rules?

She sensed danger in what Houjou had just said, but Houjou was not done speaking.

“A negotiation is a place for those with the right to speak. We are the representatives of Houjou and we are the dead. But in Houjou, even the dead have the right to speak. Thus, we can speak in this negotiation.”

It was a fictional argument that she and the rest of Houjou were the dead.

That kind of statement could not be allowed at an official meeting, but Musashi had allowed it and was continuing the negotiations based on it.

That meant there was a problem they could not solve without using a fictional arrangement. That likely involved the future of a doomed nation and the assumptions of what Hashiba would do *even though they were not here*.

And Houjou had just begun to go on the attack.

Before, she had only discussed what she had control over, but now she brought up the rules of the negotiation.

That meant she had reached for something she could safely use as a weapon. And since she shared a “worldview” with her opponent, that weapon would work against that opponent.

...But she is using her own personal logic to utilize that weapon.

That was dangerous.

Houjou was trying to take control of these negotiations. She would use this statement as the foundation from which to change the rules as she saw fit.

“———”

Terumoto glanced over at Mouri-01.

There, she saw meat. Mouri-01 was using chopsticks to hold out some beef cooked in sake.

“Princess, this might be a little heavy to start with, but eat this.”

“Oh, thanks.”

Terumoto ate the meat as if pecking at the chopsticks.

...Oh, that's good.

She then quickly swallowed it and whispered while pretending to chew.

“If the effects of Houjou’s ploy reach us, we need to put a stop to it.”

“Testament. I will be on the lookout.”

She gave a smile that said “perfect” and then faced forward again. And...

“Bow your head, Musashi Secretary.”

Houjou brought out their own rules.

“Because you are lower than us in this negotiation.”

Masazumi thought:

...That doesn't make any sense at all...!

Neshinbara thought:

...I had a feeling this was coming...!

Neshinbara listened to Ujinao.

“Now then,” she began. “This negotiation is about planning for the Siege of Odawara.”

Neshinbara said nothing because a careless reply would be dangerous.

But Ujinao asked a question while well aware of his caution.

“Isn’t that right?”

She pressed him for an answer, so he replied from beyond his sign frame. He pointed out her mistake.

“It also doubles as the Sieges of Bitchu Takamatsu Castle and Kanie Castle.”

“They are essentially renting out space within Houjou. As the landlords, we hold the greatest authority.”

Everyone gave a quiet “eh” of surprise at the end. But...

...Why doesn’t everyone understand...!?

Neshinbara knew that statement gave her great power.

This was dangerous.

Asama: “You know? Um, this is hard to say, but aren’t we wasting a lot of time here?”

Hori-ko: “What are you talking about, Asama-sama? Houjou just increased their own power.”

...So Ariadust-kun understands!

Me: “Hey, everyone. Who wants popcorn?”

Silver Wolf: “U-um, my king? Do you have any beef consommé flavor?”

Things were growing lively behind him, but Neshinbara faced Houjou once more.

“So you have the greatest authority?”

“Then where are you planning to hold the Siege of Odawara? Without our approval, I mean? ...You cannot advance history without our approval. Surely, you had not forgotten that. Heh heh. I guess I can’t blame you. I doubt you ever gave any thought to a doomed nation before. Yes, so I will tell you how the

rules work at times like this.”

Me: “Did you just feel your crotch tense up?”

Tonbokiri: “Masazumi, did you?”

Vice President: “Calm down...!”

Gold Mar: “Man, Noririn is going to have a tough time in the future.”

...Why don't they ever show that kind of concern when it comes to Shakespeare and me?

Was it because they thought he would be fine?

But he had to focus on the negotiation.

“Are you really doing this?”

“Of course,” said Houjou Ujinao. “The Kantou Liberation is something Musashi wants as well. But you require Houjou’s assistance. You are asking for our help here. ...Am I wrong?”

She once more pressed him for an answer.

So he decided to ask a question of his own.

“Who is the moderator of these negotiations?”

“That would be me. Because the negotiations are centered on the Siege of Odawara.”

“Wrong,” said Neshinbara. “In negotiations, the moderator is a representative of the nation that supplied the venue. Yes, for example...”

Just as Neshinbara placed a hand on his chest to say it was him, everyone looked to a certain individual.

“Is it Horizon...!?”

Me: “Umm, me. Me, me, me. It’s me. Have you all forgotten about me? Well?”

Hori-ko: “This is a popularity contest.”

Novice: “U-umm, Ariadust-kun? Could you grant your position to me?”

Hori-ko: “Which would you like: Blue Thunder employee or normal student?”

Novice: “I was talking about the moderator!”

Hori-ko: “How very honest of you. To reward your honesty, I will lend you both positions: Blue Thunder employee *and* normal student.”

Almost Everyone: “You’re only lending them!?”

Wait! thought Neshinbara.

He had tried to become the moderator to take control of the situation, but things had taken an unexpected turn.

Musashi’s Princess was approaching. She looked alternately between Houjou Ujinao and him before pulling a sumo referee’s fan from the storage space behind her.

“Heyyyyy! You’re not out yet! You’re not out yet! Not yeeeeet!! Keep it up!”

Three of the girls ran up, restrained her, and dragged her away.

Musashi’s Princess responded to her wordless removal while her legs dangled above the floor.

“Oh? What is the matter, everyone? I was merely giving my best judgement in the Shounosuke Kimura style.”

“Please,” said Naomasa. “Don’t say anything.”

The girls did not stop until Asama had placed Horizon Ariadust in the center of their group. And Asama spread out a few things in front of her.

“Look, Horizon. There are new popcorn flavors.”

With that new scene beginning, it seemed the position of moderator would not be coming to Neshinbara.

...This is bad.

With such a liberal moderator, he would have to do something about Houjou’s advantage on his own. That would of course take a few different

things, but...

...Okay.

This is Plan A, he decided as he continued the negotiation.

“Houjou Ujinao, this means you do not have the greatest authority here.”

“But we are higher than you. Because we have the right to control the Siege of Odawara.”

“Then let’s do this,” said Neshinbara. “Three castles.”

Neshinbara limited the number once more.

“Three. That is all.”

He would not compromise. Houjou Ujinao responded with a slight smile. The smile formed at the corners of her mouth as if she did not mind if he acted that way.

“Twelve,” she said. “Let us start the negotiation from the 12 castles that Matsudaira was involved in attacking.”

“No, I’m saying it’s 3. ...Out of concern for you.”

“Do not be silly. This is a history recreation.”

“Yes, it is a history recreation. And you intend to follow the rules of the history recreation, do you not?”

“Testament. We do indeed.”

“Then it’s 3. ...As Hashiba’s agent here, I cannot back down from that number.”

“Oh?” Ujinao turned her head somewhat. “As the attacking force, it is true you are being *left in charge of the history recreation that Hashiba would have completed had they been here.*”

Neshinbara braced his mind against what Houjou was saying.

...Here it comes.

Vice President: “Hey.”

Honda Masazumi must have also sensed the danger in this.

Her senses were accurate. After all, if they were going to name themselves an agent of Hashiba in the Siege of Odawara...

“You are also obligated to conquer the castles which were attacked by Hashiba.”

Ujinao smiled as she displayed the list of castles once more. It included all of them, from the preliminary battles to the supporting castles.

“Including Odawara Castle, that is 26. ...26! Let us negotiate over all of those castles!”

Yoshiyasu ran to the meeting area.

She had been listening in via divine transmission.

A few lights had been set up to illuminate the meal area inside the fence as the sun set.

In there, she saw a familiar face at the table on the left.

It was Houjou Ujinao.

While finding the scent of cooked tomato to be a little too strong, Yoshiyasu spoke up.

“Ujinao!”

Just like that Ookubo girl had said, you could not let your guard down around that girl. But Yoshiyasu had something else to say now.

“I thought you wanted the Kantou Liberation!?”

“Of course I do, Satomi Yoshiyasu.”

Ujinao replied with a smile.

Yoshiyasu had never seen that smile before. It was relaxed and natural, but...

...*Hey*.

Ujinao thought to herself.

...Ujinao.

Why...?

“Are you crying...?”

Suzu trembled when she heard Yoshiyasu.

...Ah.

She knew now why only she had reacted differently when she had sensed this smile before.

When she used her senses more closely, she could indeed detect tears dripping from Ujinao’s eyes.

But this whole time...

...She seemed so happy.

That was why Suzu had not noticed.

And Suzu remembered what Neshinbara had said about this opponent.

She was Kali, the second face of the virtuous princess. If Ujinao had that inside her...

“Are you...happy?”

Suzu voiced what she had realized and the others may not have realized.

“Are you...happy, Ujinao...-san?”

Her question received a definite answer.

Ujinao turned toward her.

Houjou’s leader slowly turned toward her from the depths of that maelstrom of forced arguments.

She was smiling.

And tears spilled from that expression as if to say she did not even need to nod.

Ujinao realized the scene had been reset.

She had been cornered, she had cornered them, and everything had been rewound, but she had rewound it even further to regain her initial advantage.

Of course, this was more than just rewinding. Houjou's right to speak gave them an advantage.

Musashi's Princess was the moderator here, but she was an observer. She was on the enemy's side, but she was not an enemy.

Ujinao only needed to calmly swim through the negotiation like a water snake and then constrict her opponent.

"26 castles. Every single one of them involved either Hashiba or Matsudaira. If we are to follow the history recreation, then you must be prepared to conquer them all."

She was thankful for this.

"Of course, if you cannot conquer all 26 castles, you will have to negotiate for some other terms. ...In other words, you must compensate us in place of conquering the castles. You are prepared for that, I assume?"

Conquering all 26 would simply not be possible.

They did not have enough time or personnel.

So that settled it. The shape of the future would be decided here and now.

"Victors."

Matsudaira, who will take control of the Far East. This ship called Musashi.

"We of Houjou have had our fall predicted for more than 100 years, so bow your heads, oh victors, to decorate our final moments."

Ujinao took in a breath.

...Victory, existence, glory, and all else.

Musashi looked isolated as it flew through the sky, but they had the possibility of gaining all those things.

On the land, the nations were connected to each other and to the ocean through the development of roads and other means, but that would not erase Houjou's historical fall.

The same was sure to happen to Musashi or Matsudaira eventually.

But at the moment, there was a world of difference between those destined to lose and those destined to rise.

...This ship carries everything away.

She had looked up at it countless times over her life.

And now Houjou held it in their hands while accepting their destined fall.

She had used forceful methods, unseemly tactics, and pathetic stratagems.

But if they accepted their fall in this way, would they be able to purify their losing karma?

"Now," she said clearly. "Future victors, bow your heads to the present losers. ...And the future living, lower your heads to the present dead."

They were negotiating the number of castles.

"26. Will that number destroy your ship or carry it? The wave of Sagami is still quite large."

"Ujinao...!"

Yoshiyasu launched her voice toward the girl she had long thought of as her nemesis.

...Damn.

This was not her place.

She was not the leader of negotiations here.

But Houjou and Satomi had a long history together.

She was really just giving in to emotion, but there was something she wanted to say about this negotiation.

"Is this what you want!?"

“Satomi Yoshiyasu.” Houjou Ujinao smiled. “Due to our nations’ relationship over the past several generations, I want you to see this unsightly display.”

Because...

“According to the Testament, Satomi Yoshiyasu took Hashiba’s side during the Siege of Odawara, but he was late to arrive. A lot happened afterwards and Satomi had its territory confiscated by Hashiba. So after that...”

“Judge. ...After that, Satomi relied on Matsudaira.”

“Exactly.” Ujinao swayed a bit as she spoke. “You too will be taken away from me by this ship.”

“...Huh?”

...Me “too”?

Yoshiyasu did not know what that meant and was at a loss for words, but Ujinao moved.

She faced the Musashi Secretary and showed off her teeth.

“Now, let us begin, Musashi resident who will achieve victory by living. Let us begin the negotiation over these 26 castles.”

Neshinbara opened his mouth to respond to Ujinao whose hair fluttered as she swayed.

There was one thing he had to say here.

“There will be 3 castles.”

He breathed in.

“I have no intention of accepting your 26.”

“Oh?”

Ujinao smiled and tilted her head. She swayed her body, swayed back, and asked a question.

“You intend to follow the history recreation, you are Matsudaira, and you are

also Hashiba, so how can you possibly reject the 26 castles?”

“Let us confirm some things.”

Ujinao replied immediately to the Musashi Secretary.

“No.”

She knew what he was planning: he would trap her.

He would have her unwittingly step on a few traps, reveal them in the end, and use them to keep her from escaping.

So she could not go along with it.

“I will not listen to your cheap confirmations. ...We are discussing the Siege of Odawara here. And I am Houjou’s leader. You only need listen to my words.”

“I see,” he replied.

He then swung his right hand and asked a question.

“Then are you saying...that you are the leader of this negotiation?”

The Musashi Secretary had asked his question.

...That would mean...

“———”

Ujinao froze in place.

She could not give a simple yes or no answer.

Silver Wolf: “You got her, didn’t you!?”

When Mitotsudaira saw Houjou Ujinao fall silent, she realized what the Secretary had done.

She did not know what argument he was going to make since he was something of a crazy person, but he had gotten her somehow. She just knew it.

He had needed to prevent Houjou from acting like the leader of the negotiation.

Silver Wolf: “The previous series of denials and attacks is working.”

Smoking Girl: “Huh? What do you mean?”

Vice President: “He made himself into a pain in the butt.”

Exactly.

Silver Wolf: “Judge. Before, the Secretary would respond to everything Houjou Ujinao said and work to crush it. And he did so every single time. So Houjou has to be cautious to prevent him from attacking after everything she says.”

The best way to prevent an opponent from using their specialty was to ignore it or reject it.

...Houjou probably intended to make her own attack after rebuffing the Secretary's words.

But the Secretary had made a different sort of attack.

Silver Wolf: “He asked Houjou about exactly what it is they want here. ...He asked them *if they are the leader of this negotiation.*”

The result was clear.

Silver Wolf: “Houjou cannot do anything. Because if they respond, he might attack like before, but if they deny it, they will be accepting that they are not the leader.”

However, Houjou Ujinao had an automaton body. She had high-speed thoughts.

She would be quick to recover or rethink her plan. So...

Vice President: “Hurry, Neshinbara.”

Mitotsudaira thought she heard a voice saying “judge”.

Just as Masazumi encouraged him, the Secretary turned to the side, brought a hand to his face, and pushed his glasses up with his middle finger.

“Three. ...I will now have you accept that line of thinking.”

Ujiteru heard a quiet comment from Genan who was seated next to him.

“Oh?”

It was an impressed-sounding breath, so Ujiteru elbowed Genan in the head.

“What’s that ‘oh’ for? C’mon now.”

“Testament. It was for their Secretary. ...‘I will now have you accept that line of thinking’, hm?” He spoke and nodded as if confirming the meaning of those words. “When he puts it like that, we cannot say we have not accepted it or ‘do not recall’ accepting it. At best, we can say we will not accept it. After all, you cannot deny the future.”

Meaning...

“Ujinao must listen.”

Neshinbara breathed in.

“I will say it as many times as it takes: 3 castles.”

“That is not possible.”

“Indeed it is not.”

That briefly confused Ujinao.

And Neshinbara immediately continued.

“There are 3 reasons why.”

This was an important statement because his opponent could not immediately reject it either.

If she did, she would not have to reject all three reasons he was about to give.

So he started by stating the first reason.

“The first reason is that Musashi has very few name inheritors. And we have almost none who were involved in the Siege of Odawara.”

So...

“Who are you saying will represent the attackers in conquering each of the

castles, Houjou Ujinao?”

“———”

She could not respond.

So he kept going.

“Similarly, the second reason is the name inheritors on the Houjou side. At the very least, you have the 3 who are present here.”

“We have 4!” said Ujinao. “Me, Kotarou, my uncle, and my great-uncle.”

“That great-uncle is dead by the time of the Siege of Odawara. You can only talk about using 3 of those here. If you have any others, then please provide a list.”

Neshinbara made sure to keep going.

“Of course, no matter how much personnel you have prepared, we cannot respond in kind.”

“You cowards...!” Ujinao scattered tears as she raised her voice. “Would you waste all of Houjou’s preparations!?”

“Let me provide the third reason.”

It was...

“The history recreation of the Siege of Odawara.”

Neshinbara typed text into his sign frame while reading it off.

He was working quickly. His reading was fairly wooden, but there was no helping that.

“As this will be the history recreation of the Siege of Odawara, we must follow the Testament descriptions. We of Musashi are to play the role of the attackers, but we lack the name inheritors of those attackers. If you are to hold an accurate history recreation, we cannot participate,” explained Neshinbara. “But we have been permitted to participate in the Siege of Odawara as Matsudaira and as agents of Hashiba. That is based on a request from Houjou and Mouri and, since the agreement has been made, it cannot be unmade without both

sides' approval."

"Then..."

"You have something prepared, don't you? I doubt you put the Siege of Odawara in motion while ignorant of these rules." Neshinbara typed the words into his keyboard. "Basically, if you want to say a battle recreated history when none of the name inheritors were present, you need an interpretation. ...And history is made by name inheritors. If we do establish the Siege of Odawara here, the only name inheritors in the battle will be on the Houjou side. Since we are acting as Hashiba and Matsudaira, we can establish that simply by facing Houjou's representatives in duels."

"Then we only need to place representatives in the 26 castles, correct?"

"No, not correct. ...This is a history recreation." Neshinbara spoke directly to her. "During the Siege of Odawara, most of the Houjou forces were closed up in Odawara Castle. You were, as was Houjou Ujiteru there. How many fought outside the castle?"

"Are you saying we can only fight that many battles?"

"You must have known this from the start."

After all...

"Earlier, I gave a list of your castles that have a lord, remember? That has to be the result you ultimately wanted."

Neshinbara displayed that list of castles he had proposed earlier.

- **Preliminary Battle: Yamanaka Castle, Nirayama Castle, Shimoda Castle.**
- **Main Battle: Matsuida Castle, Tsukui Castle, Hachigata Castle.**

"These 6 castles plus Odawara Castle are the 7 castles we should use."

"So your total is 7?"

"3."

Neshinbara did not back down.

He swung his right hand forward.

“Our intent is as follows: First we look at 4 of the 7 castles. For 2 of those, we will send in name inheritors to duel and achieve victory for us. We will also send name inheritors to the other 2, but if we win the previous 2, we can afford to lose these 2. And...”

He said it.

“Then we send our own people for the remaining 3 castles. *Thus, 3 castles.* That’s three people.”

Impossible, thought Ujinao.

The idea of accepting the 7-castle list and sending in Musashi’s forces for 3 of them made sense.

But hadn’t Musashi said they did not have any name inheritors that fit the Siege of Odawara?

...Do they have enough for the other 4 castles?

Ujinao looked around and found some people. First...

“Satomi Yoshiyasu.”

And...

“Date Narumi...”

“Exactly.” The Musashi Secretary spoke from beyond his sign frame. “Now, Musashi has the advantage of being able to send in another nation’s Vice Chancellor and Student Council President as our representatives. Houjou Ujinao, what about you?”

“Are you using them as a shield?”

“I do not recall saying anything of the sort.”

“True enough,” replied the Date Vice Chancellor. She brushed back her hair before continuing. “This is a Date clan history recreation. ...It’s sort of like paying rent.”

“Yes,” agreed Yoshiyasu. “And I have my own reasons for joining this battle.”

The Musashi Secretary raised his right hand.

“We can argue over the castles if you like. ...But do you have anyone capable of defeating these two, Houjou Ujinao?”

“You only have two, don’t you? The Date Vice Chancellor and Satomi Yoshiyasu. ...These two might be able to win, but what about the other castles?”

“We will handle three of them. Because we have to deal with the three of you.”

That was three from Musashi. And the Date Vice Chancellor and Yoshiyasu were in charge of two. That only left...

“Two more castles. ...Where are you going to find that many name inheritors? Surely you are not going to suggest we begin a political negotiation over it at this point.”

“I do not recall saying anything of the sort.”

With that statement, the Musashi Secretary raised his right hand.

Two sign frames followed his hand and they were both quite large.

“These are my trump cards. ...Destiny Frame! Take a look at these!”

The decorative frames were as large as a tatami mat and each one displayed someone.

One was a white demon standing in a dimly-lit stone hall.

“I, Uesugi Kagekatsu, shall send my warriors to participate in the Siege of Odawara.”

...Sviet Rus’s king...!

“Lord Kagekatsu was one of Hashiba’s main forces during the Siege of Odawara. He participated in conquering quite a few castles, including Matsuida Castle and Minowa Castle. And...”

He gave a smile and the other frame showed a woman with the evening sky in the background.

“The history recreation has me arriving late, but if Yoshiyasu and one of

Masamune's troops are participating, then I have no choice but to join in."

With a rolling voice, the figure placed a large fan over her mouth. She was...

"Mogami Yoshiaki...!"

Chapter 37: Usurper of the Gathering Spot

第三十七章

『集合地の篡奪者』



呼ばれて来たとき
一体皆は
どういう顔をするか
配点 (頼られたい)

When I am called for and arrive

How do I want

Everyone to greet me?

Point Allocation (I Want Them to Rely On Me)

“Ko ko,” Yoshiaki laughed in her throat.

Shakenobe approached in the air next to her and passed her a glass of sake.

“This is last year’s batch. ...This is such a fun time of year because I can sit and watch the season’s ears of rice growing. So it would also be nice to watch the growth of those children who passed through our land.”

Yoshiaki used her fingertips to toss her fan into the air above and grabbed the glass instead.

“Now, let us go. ...Yamagata Castle.”

“Cook some more food to be ready in three hours’ time. I quite like chicken.”

As Yoshiaki spoke and smiled on the sign frame, the sky moved behind her.

Neshinbara looked up at that and breathed in.

...Not good, not good.

He could tell how excited he was.

But not just because history was on the move.

He was moving it.

Yoshiaki moved away in the image. And if she could produce a sign frame like that...

Asama: “Masazumi, I’m going to open a divine transmission line so Mogami can join the divine chat.”

Vice President: “Judge. ...Do the same for Sviet Rus.”

A new sign frame appeared in response and the connection settings scrolled

across it.

That meant he held the station that linked Oushuu, Sviet Rus, and Kantou.

...This is so exciting!!

Neshinbara swung his left hand forward and threw his words toward Ujinao.

“Now, you have a choice, Houjou Ujinao.”

“What might that be?”

“Judge.” He nodded. “Date, Satomi, Sviet Rus, and Mogami. ...That’s four battles, but *are you going to fight them?*”

Masazumi caught on to what Neshinbara was doing.

...Oh.

So that’s it, she belatedly realized.

Behind the scenes while he was proposing his number of castles and negotiating over them, the others had been contacting Mogami and Sviet Rus and urging them to cooperate as part of the history recreation.

Even with the history recreation as a justification, those other nations would not necessarily take part. They had only decided to do so because they had concluded that the Kantou Liberation and this battle would give their nation an advantage in the world.

She had sent some information to Sviet Rus and Mogami: what the Reine des Garous had told her about Hexagone Française’s situation and that Date Narumi and Satomi Yoshiyasu had decided to participate.

Mouri had already made a major move.

Contributing to the changing of the world and gaining power would give them a superior position in the next age.

If Mouri was moving in the west, Kantou had to make their move as well. And if they failed to produce results, they would have less authority when speaking to Mouri in the age to come.

Narumi had already decided to join the battle for Date and Satomi had done the same.

Masazumi felt that was probably the reason why.

...It's too soon to think Uesugi and Mogami are doing this to help us.

The world was not that kind.

But it was what it was. Whatever their reasons might have been, they were helping Musashi.

She wanted to be thankful for that.

...That just leaves this meeting. But...

She knew what Neshinbara was doing.

His strategy was to use non-Musashi forces for 4 of the 7 castles.

He would concentrate those four powerful forces there instead of having Musashi's forces fight.

Righteousness: "To be honest, I think I'm the weak link in this lineup."

Unturning: "If you fight based on that assumption, you'll do fine."

This was her final fight against Houjou, so Yoshiyasu might be the most likely to achieve victory. But...

...Not necessarily.

Neshinbara was negotiating so they would not have to fight in the end.

Because if they used such powerful outside forces for 4 of the 7 battles, the numbers would determine Houjou's defeat. Even if Musashi lost all 3 of the remaining battles, they would still have 4 wins and 3 losses.

They had not discussed whether it would be best 4 out of 7, but looking at the possible benefits and losses, Houjou would receive no benefit from this.

...Honestly.

He had bought them enough time to prepare these external forces.

Just how much had he bet on guiding Houjou Ujinao and restricting this to the field of the history recreation?

Masazumi thought, *I bet he would do anything if it would make things more interesting.*

“Now,” Neshinbara said to Houjou. “Who do you want?”

“...Huh!?”

Masazumi raised her voice at that unexpected question.

“Wait a second! Neshinbara! What does that mean!?”

Neshinbara turned back with a “what kind of question is that?” look on his face.

“Houjou doesn’t have enough people to cover for 7 castles, right? Since we’ve called in external forces, it’s only fair for them to do the same if they don’t have enough.”

So...

“We need to make sure we all have a real blast together.”

“Wait!!”

Asama: “Oh, wow! Masazumi is trying to *stop* a war!”

Azuma: “Has she gone crazy?”

Gold Mar: “Hmm. Imperial boy, isn’t that being a little too direct?”

Vice President: “Stopping war is the normal thing to do!”

Wise Sister: “Oh, this girl. She’s jealous that someone else is starting the war, isn’t she!?”

Me: “Don’t steal my warrrrr!”

Vice President: “Stop confusing me by giving me too much to respond to!”

“W-wait a second, Neshinbara!”

Masazumi had to ask something.

It was true what he said followed the current rules.

But he was being too honest.

...Politicians are supposed to minimize our own damage!

She had thought he was trying to do just that, but now he was multiplying the enemies.

What do we do now? she thought while getting her mind racing. But just then...

Someone reacted.

Houjou Ujinao clenched and swung both her hands.

“That’s perfect! Let’s do that!! Yes!”

Did your character just change?

But this had to be a godsend for Houjou. Musashi had dug in their heels and just about reduced the number of castles to 3, but now the number was left at 7 and Houjou could bring in powerful allies from other nations. So...

“Now.” Ujinao breathed in, straightened her posture and expression, and spoke in a plain voice. “Houjou will follow that plan.”

Unturning: “...I think she might fit in on the Musashi surprisingly well.”

Flat Vassal: “I thought she was a pain when things didn’t go her way, but it looks like she’s still a pain when things do go her way...”

Vice President: “...”

Marube-ya: “Oh, she’s thinking. She’s thinking.”

Vice President: “Well, yeah. I have to think about this one...!!”

Masazumi thought.

But a voice reached her before she could gather her thoughts.

“———”

It was a distant voice from an external loudspeaker or something.

...A ship broadcast?

A voice was being sent her way from somewhere in the distance. But...

“Where...?”

Everyone exchanged a glance and looked around, but even as they all looked each other in the eye...

“...Where? No...who?”

It was Mukai who asked that and turned around.

She had her hands to her ears which were equipped with Noise Neighbor. Even she was curious where this voice was coming from.

She seemed to be holding her hands southward, but...

...Where? It has to be a loudspeaker from the city, but...

Masazumi did not know. However...

“————”

She felt like some kind of voice was reaching her.

What is it? she wondered while noticing Naomasa opening a sign frame above Mukai’s head and writing something there: Try using Musashi’s auditory devices.

Asama nodded and raised a sign frame.

And then...

“Um, Suzu-san?”

“Nn.”

Sign frames appeared by Asama’s hand and near Mukai’s ears.

Just then, Mukai said “ah” and pointed south.

The sky had passed scarlet and was fading from purple to the dark blue of night, but there was a sign frame there in the distance. Masazumi could tell it was a Catholic sign frame, but...

...What is it?

“Umm, I’ll try zooming in on that, okay?”

After seeing everyone nod, Asama opened a single large sign frame in front of the Main Blue Thunder.

It displayed the sign frame in the air. And on it...

“Can you hear me!? Can you hear me, cowards of Musashi!? I know you must be inside that stealth barrier, but answer me if you can see out!”

Asama formed a circle with her fingers to say it was okay to respond, so Masazumi sighed at the familiar voice.

“Ootani, huh?”

Masazumi saw someone she had seen just a few hours before.

But now he was small like a Mouse.

...Is that the ocean behind him? So is he standing on an embankment or something?

“Asama, why is the sign frame so far away?”

“Well, after the incident earlier today, I increased Musashi’s data defenses. The divine transmission defenses kick in at a 3km radius around the Musashi.”

...Oh, so that’s why.

It’s for our safety, but it sure is inconvenient, she also thought. However...

“Are you listening, Musashi!?”

The cameraman did not seem very experienced. Mouse-sized Ootani wandered in the frame.

“As the observer sent by Hashiba-sama, I approve of that idea!”

“Oh, the one about ending this with only 3 castles? I thought that was a great idea too.”

“No! How cheap can you be!? I meant the one where multiple nations take part!”

“Did we say anything about that? I think you must have misheard.”

“You did say it! Your Secretary did!”

“You must be hearing things. Our Secretary tends to do that to people.”

Me: “Isn’t that a little forced?”

Vice President: “Do you want to do this!?”

Righteousness: “I do not envy you here...”

Vice President: “...It does a surprising amount of damage when someone is understanding...”

But Ootani crossed his arms and shifted his position.

There were skewers of dumplings on the embankment which may have belonged to the cameraman.

He walked in front of those dumplings and lifted up one skewer with nothing left on it.

“Listen. I have been listening in and you have been using all sorts of nonsensical arguments.”

“Crossdressing Honda-kun, please tell him not to be so rude.”

Don’t ask the impossible.

But she understood what Ootani was trying to say.

“You want us to use as many agents as possible for the Siege of Odawara?”

“Testament! We were already thinking of asking Sviet Rus to fight for us. And, Musashi, we have business with you as well.”

Masazumi thought about what he said there.

...Business?

She was confused and she looked across the others.

For some reason, they all looked away so quickly she could have sworn it made a noise.

“Hey.”



Gold Mar: “Aren’t you glad we’re at our sniper posts, Ga-chan? We might’ve been dragged into that otherwise.”

Tachibana Wife: “Master Muneshige, I hate how I’m gradually getting used to this...”

Tachibana Husband: “Not to worry, Gin. It is for your own safety.”

What does that mean?

But it looked like Masazumi had to ask about this herself.

“Ootani...have we done anything wrong? I honestly can’t think of anything.”

Worshiper: “Didn’t we send him flying with a table and then hit him with a shell?”

Unturning: “Oh, that’s nothing really...”

Silver Wolf: “N-no, um, that was a sort of solution! Isn’t that right!? It was a solution to a problem!”

Oh, right. That did happen... thought Masazumi as Ootani pointed the skewer at her from the sign frame displayed on the giant sign frame in front of her.

“I did not mean it like that. ...Musashi! You have forgotten one thing! You joined Houjou’s side during the Battle of Kanagawa. And it was so you could oppose P.A. Oda. That means you are Houjou as far as P.A. Oda is concerned.”

With that said, Ootani shook his small body.

He pointed the skewer at her again while ether light scattered from him.

“As the Siege of Odawara’s observer acting on Hashiba-sama’s behalf, I demand that the Matsudaira forces fight the Siege of Odawara as an agent of Houjou!”

Ootani saw Wakisaka give a thumbs up on the other side of the broadcast *lernen figur*.

Next to her, Yoshiaki somewhat glared at him while using her finger to write on her own Magie Figur: “I think you did well.”

...It's transparent, but it's still hard to read backwards...

This is odd, thought Ootani. I am a pure, just, and honorable virus, but I feel like these two have a very low opinion of me.

Regardless, he had a job to do. His *lernen figur* gave an overhead view of the Musashi. He thought he knew where his targets were located, but he was not entirely sure.

...It should be fine as long as they can hear my voice.

Even a messenger of justice lacked confidence here. He was worried his directional voice was accidentally hitting some other nearby house. Or was he overthinking this? Regardless...

"I heard you say that the Siege of Odawara will be fought using 7 castles. Meaning 7 battles."

Musashi's Vice President responded to him:

"Did we say that?"

"You did! Are you trying to dodge the issue after all this!?"

"No, I'm not dodging the issue. You might not really understand what's going on, but I don't really understand either, so that's fine."

"Nothing about that is fine!"

"Oh? It's not fine? Then just give up on this."

She ended the divine transmission from her end.

...Eh?

Without thinking, he came to a stop and Wakisaka peered down at him through the broadcast *lernen figur*.

"Umm."

She diagonally karate chopped through the *lernen figur*.

The *lernen figur* shook, and...

"Nh!"

Ootani rolled across the embankment.

Yoshiaki tilted her head as he rolled a few times.

“...Is that fun?”

“I-it is not fun! That *lernen figur* is synced with me, so be gentle with it!”

“Yay!”

Wakisaka grabbed the *lernen figur* on both sides and shook it up and down.

She thought Ootani would dance through the air along with it, but...

“Why are you slamming yourself against the embankment...or sinking into it?”

“I cannot just fly, so I’m set to remain at ground level!”

“Oh, so you can’t fly...”

“Wh-what is that glare and thin smile for!?”

“So you can’t fly... Sigh.”

“You added a sigh this time, didn’t you!?”

Yoshiaki pointed the *lernen figur* toward him as if telling him to calm down.

He just about slid across the embankment to match the motion, but he cut off the syncing. And then...

“It happened in the final moment. I’ll replay it so just watch... Look, right here.”

There was a circular silhouette on the right of the freeze-frame Yoshiaki stopped on.

“Is that a coin bullet...!? Was this their Techno Hexen’s doing!?”

“...Shooting a 1m square from more than 3km away is pretty reckless.”

Yoshiaki sighed and looked to the south where the Musashi floated in Odawara’s sky.

She patted the cat that approached by her feet, perhaps hoping to be fed.

“Now we have room to intervene.”

Neshinbara worked to calm his heart while hearing the Vice President

whispering “Wrap it up! Hurry!” from behind him.

In the overhead sign frame displaying Sviet Rus, Uesugi Kagekatsu placed a hand on his chin.

He was thinking in silence. He was likely calmly considering where the situation would lead.

In the one displaying Mogami, Yoshiaki was laughing and dancing. The two leaders were contrasted sharply, but...

“Lord Kagekatsu, please make a decision. ...At this rate, you will be on Hashiba’s side.”

“Testament. There is no avoiding that. Ha ha...! So you face a military contest against us, Musashi...! Would this be an unavoidable confrontation?”

Lord Kagekatsu really is so cool! thought Neshinbara.

A Warring States commander had to feel their heart dance at the thought of battle, no matter their position or their relationship with the opponent.

KageV: “Wh-what do we do!? I was thinking it would be nice to head south and get some sun, but now we’re looking at a major battle with Musashi!”

Shigeko: “Oh. Well, if that happens, I’ll take care of it.”

Tomo-no-Bu: “Wait! That would be a job for me! I must strike back against that insolent nudist!”

Shigeko: “I really doubt Musashi would send their Chancellor out to fight.”

Tomo-no-Bu: “...Never mind then.”

KageV: “Saitou-san, you’ve really taken a liking to the Musashi Chancellor, haven’t you!?”

Shigeko: “Anyway, Kagekatsu-sama, we need to check on a few things concerning this. First and foremost, what kind of political deal can we make with Musashi using this. After all, we would lose a lot if we simply acted as Hashiba’s pawns. I was thinking we could find a way to leave Musashi owing us

one after this.”

Love Man: “Ha ha ha! I’m back after getting injured again!”

KageV: “You bastarrrrrrrrrrrrrd!”

Mayoress: “Hey, you lot. I’ve made some borsch using a cow corpse, so come line up in the dining hall. Form two lines.”

KageV: “Good! Dinner is right on time, Marfa...!”

“How could you do this just before dinner, you dung beetle!”

Lord Kagekatsu began a live scolding on the Sviet Rus sign frame and he sent Naoe Kanetsugu bouncing across the room.

As Mitotsudaira watched...

Silver Wolf: “I-I see he still rules with an iron fist...!”

10ZO: “Judge! You can tell why he got the ‘the terrible’ moniker...!”

Novice: “You all got to see this live, didn’t you? I’m so jealous...!”

“There is no place for you heeeeeeeere!”

It was a very intense display, but it scared Mitotsudaira how used to it she had become.

...Well, I’m sure the people there are even more used to it.

Meanwhile, she saw someone approach the screen while the lightning flashes and sounds of impacts continuing behind her.

It was Honjou Shigenaga. She wore a summer uniform and pushed her sunglasses up her nose.

“Kagekatsu-sama is busy showing kindness to a subordinate, so I will speak on his behalf. First of all, I will say that we would like to participate in the Siege of Odawara.”

“...You mean you will be our enemy?”

Shigenaga looked up at Mitotsudaira’s comment and looked straight at the silver wolf.

“We will head south. ...That is what I mean.”

KageV: “Yes! South! Because it’s summer! I want to buy a lot to prepare for the long winter here! The animals we gathered for the zoo still aren’t used to our land, so I want to buy the perfect feed for them! We also need books for the children!”

Love Man: “Kagekatsu-kuuun! O-over here! Hit me on this shoulder!”

KageV: “Diiiiiiiie!”

They sure are getting worked up, thought Masazumi.

She had only spoken with Sviet Rus via divine transmission, but...

...I could use this as an opportunity to meet them directly.

Then pulling this off was worth it for both of them.

“Neshinbara, if we are going to fight a battle against Sviet Rus here, do you have any suggestions?”

“The Keichou-Dewa Conflict. That would be the most efficient.”

Me: “Kate owed a...what?”

Vice President: “Everyone, ignore him.”

Me: “Ah! Curse you! But I know Horizon won’t ignore-...why are you glaring at me like that!? This is new!”

Glaring at him like what? Masazumi wondered, but it must have been something new.

Vice President: “I think Crossunite touched on the Keichou-Dewa Conflict during the three-nations meeting. ...It’s also known as the Punishment of Aizu. Simply put, Uesugi joined the Western Army at Sekigahara, so Matsudaira attacked them.”

But they had support in that attack.

Vice President: “Mogami and Date assisted the invasion of Uesugi. ...Sviet Rus

advancing south differs from that, but we would benefit a lot if we had that apply to the current situation.”

Silver Wolf: “Because if we fight now, we won’t have to fight against Sviet Rus during Sekigahara?”

That was exactly it.

Nine-Tailed Girl: “Then would I have to fight on your anti-Uesugi force?”

On her sign frame, the fox laughed from her throat.

Mogami would also benefit here. Which meant...

“Include me and our respective positions are going to be tricky,” said the Date Vice Chancellor.

And it was not just her.

“Will you work us into the Siege of Odawara too? ...On the side opposing Hashiba’s agent. In other words, opposing Musashi. Mouri forces were in fact sent to the Siege of Odawara and provided sea transport support, so we have the right to participate.”

Mouri Terumoto crossed her arms and smiled as she spoke.

...Yes, I had a feeling this was coming.

Masazumi watched as Mouri Terumoto breathed a sigh that seemed to say “finally”.

And Terumoto waved a hand behind her.

The *Belle de Marionnette* named Mouri-01 responded by preparing the things they had brought along.

Terumoto spoke as she did so.

“We all have our own sides and objectives here, so how about we make a bet? Our top objective is of course your Musashi forces. And here’s what we’re willing to bet on it.”

The maid *Belle de Marionnettes* had instantly removed everything from the

table in front of her. Mouri-01 then placed two things on the table.

They were largish transportation containers.

They were about the size of a person's upper body, so big enough to hold a large musical instrument.

...*What are those?*

Just as Masazumi wondered that, one person responded from the confused group.

It was Horizon.

"Are those...?"

"Testament. I suppose you would know."

Terumoto snapped her fingers and Mouri-01 both nodded and opened the containers.

A white gas expanded as the containers automatically opened up and several "seal" *signe cadres* appeared.

The containers revealed their contents:

"Our Logismoï Oplo: Phos Hyperephania and Phos Kenodoxia."

The shapes were formed from the two colors of white and black. They resembled shoulder blades and a pelvis and they emitted bluish-white ether light in front of Horizon's eyes.

Terumoto heard a question while everyone gasped and stirred.

"Why?"

The question came from Houjou Ujinao.

"Those are a crucial trump card against Musashi...no, against the world."

"Now, now. ...They don't mean all that much to us."

Terumoto spread her arms and tapped the back of the containers.

"I mean, after the Siege of Bitchu Takamatsu Castle and Sekigahara, we never

lose. We only need to march down the path of the conqueror, so our own pride and vainglory will be enough.”

“Of course,” said Terumoto. “We have our Testamenta Arma back home. That’s enough to protect our nation. But if we’re going to use these unneeded Logismo Oplo as bargaining chips...”

Terumoto felt a smile on the corners of her lips and looked to the Musashi forces.

“It would be best to use them to make peace with you after the Siege of Bitchu Takamatsu Castle. So *that’s* where we’ll use these.”

She tapped the containers once more.

“If you beat us, then we’ll force these onto you and refuse any further negotiation. If we win, we’ll give you these, so do something for us.”

Meaning...

“Whatever the official reason is, take our side during Sekigahara and Westphalia, Musashi.”

Masazumi felt like she had finally heard what Terumoto really wanted.

What she had said about the Kantou Liberation and settling the outside world was likely true.

But both of those were projects and positive dreams.

They could be seen as the wishes of vainglory.

But this was different.

...Take their side, hm?

Mouri had said that their own pride and vainglory would be enough.

That had to be coming true within them.

And that had to mean they would no longer need an external source.

So she had come out and said what she really wanted.

Mouri Terumoto was telling them to rely on and help Mouri. So...

“Judge. I understand what you want out of this battle, Mouri Terumoto. ... Mouri may participate in the duels for tomorrow’s Siege of Odawara.”

“Good,” said Terumoto with a nod.

Then she nodded a second and third time and Mouri-01 whispered to her.

“That was an excellent negotiation, Princess. ...It was the second best you have ever done.”

“What’s the first?”

“When you accepted the Roi-Soleil’s confession.”

“Is that so?” Terumoto felt no need to feel bashful. But, “That settles it then!”

She strongly slapped the Logismoï Oplo containers on either side of her.

The noise and vibration were Mouri-01’s cue to close them.

It bothered her how Musashi’s Princess was trying to peer inside, but...

“That’s fine, I guess.”

Just as she said that, the closing containers caught on something.

With a metallic noise, the containers shook and a white glowing mist sprayed out. They tried to close several times, but...

“Princess! Something is trying to get inside the containers...!”

“What?”

Terumoto leaned over the table, and...

“_____”

The containers quickly closed.

...*Huh?*

There was nothing there and the glowing mist had vanished.

The only things on the table were the white tablecloth and the closed containers.

Asama and everyone else looked to the ground.

Specifically, the ground next to Horizon.

Two objects came crawling out from under the table there: a right arm and a left arm.

The two arms arrived at her feet.

“...”

And they disappointedly shook their raised hands side to side.

“That did not work out,” said Horizon. “But we might be dealt a better hand later.”

Vice President: “Oh, a better hand. Because they’re hands.”

Tachibana Wife: “Master Muneshige, wh-what am I supposed to do...?”

Tachibana Husband: “Gin, you do not need to force a laugh.”

Tonbokiri: “...Oh, I just figured it out! So that’s what happened!”

Righteousness: “Also, don’t try to steal them!!”

Mal-Ga: “Eh, these things happen.”

They did on Musashi, anyway.

But the two arms grabbed onto the ground to do a handstand. They bent their elbows and wrists and then jumped up to Horizon’s shoulders. Everyone made sure to hide Horizon from view throughout.

Asama: “Mito! T-turn your hair this way more! You can hide the entire right side! Kimi, this way! This way!”

Hori-ko: “Thank you for your assistance, everyone.”

Horizon shook her shoulders a bit, perhaps to check on the arm connections. Asama worked at recording the negotiation while that happened.

Asama: “Um, from the Testament perspective, this is divided between Houjou and Hashiba, right? And then we added Mouri into it...”

Righteousness: “Mouri is Musashi’s enemy, so should we think of them as Hashiba here?”

Wise Sister: “Calm down! There is no way Mouri is Hashiba. Hashiba is Hashiba, Musashi is Hashiba, Mouri is Mouri and Hashiba, Uesugi is Russia and Hashiba is, um....”

Asama: “Please stop confusing yourself when you’re trying to confuse us!”

But this meant there were multiple battles being fought here. Just like during the Battle of Kanagawa.

Asama: “If we think about where each group belongs, does it come down to something like this?”

- **Siege of Odawara: Houjou, Musashi, and Mogami vs. Ootani, Date, Mogami, Uesugi, and Mouri**
- **Siege of Bitchu Takamatsu Castle: Mouri vs. Hashiba (Musashi)**
- **Siege of Kanie Castle: Takigawa and Sanada vs. Musashi**
- **Keichou-Dewa Conflict: Uesugi vs. Musashi, Date, and Mogami.**

“Since we have Yoshy-chan, Mogami will be seen as part of the Musashi forces. But how to view Musashi is trickier.”

They could be seen as either Hashiba or Houjou. With this triple and quadruple battlefield, they could be someone’s enemy or ally depending on which battle you looked at.

“I see Ootani-dono gets to be an entire genre to himself,” said Futayo.

“Who said you could name me specifically!?”

The energetic virus had appeared on a sign frame once more and Masazumi tilted her head toward it.

“Huh? Ootani, you won’t be fighting?”

“My repairs will take another 27 hours!”

Neshinbara turned toward everyone else.

“Did you jot that down?”

When everyone (including Mouri and Houjou) nodded, Ootani froze in place on the sign frame.

“Ah,” he said after a while. “That leading question was just cruel! You really are an evil group! And since I’m small, you could call this mini-cruelty!”

Silver Wolf: “Um, I’m sorry, but I just had a very unkind thought.”

Righteousness: “I kind of feel bad for him since he has to deal with you horrible people so soon after being rolled out...”

Tachibana Wife: “I doubt anything he learns here will help him with a normal opponent.”

Asama had to agree, but she changed Ootani to Hashiba on her list.

What did that leave to do?

“Now.” Neshinbara spread his arms to say his negotiation was complete. “Who will you send to the Siege of Odawara? Musashi also has to send people to Takigawa’s Siege of Kanie Castle, so we can’t fight 7 battles. That is why I hope to only send 3 people to the Siege of Odawara, but to help adjust the number of fighters from each nation and to decide who opposes whom, let’s bring it all together.”

Meaning...

“Let’s not talk about 7 castles or 2 battles. We should bring all the battles together into a single series of duels. ...How about it?”

Chapter 38: Ruler of the Common Ground

第三十八章

『落とし処の支配者』



決めていくのは
終わらせるための
始まりの準備
配点（相互）

We are deciding on

The beginning preparations

Necessary to end this

Point Allocation (Mutual)

“A single series of duels? That introduces a number of problems, including our interests and opponents. But,” said Masazumi. “It’s a pretty good idea.”

So...

“First, we need to divide up the battlefield.

“One part will be for our battle against P.A. Oda and Takigawa.

“The other will be the Siege of Odawara that doubles as the Siege of Bitchu Takamatsu Castle and the Keichou-Dewa Conflict.

“What rules will we use to determine our opponents within that?”

Just as Masazumi started pondering that question, a voice reached her.

“We can ignore the division and simply fight the appropriate opponents within Odawara.”

It was Mogami Yoshiaki. She held up a sign frame with the chart Asama had written up:

- **Siege of Odawara: Houjou, Musashi, and Mogami vs. Hashiba, Date, Mogami, Uesugi, and Mouri**
- **Siege of Bitchu Takamatsu Castle: Mouri vs. Hashiba (Musashi)**
- **Siege of Kanie Castle: Takigawa and Sanada vs. Musashi**
- **Keichou-Dewa Conflict: Uesugi vs. Musashi, Date, and Mogami.**

“Instead of deciding who our opponents will be, we can simply fight someone we are allowed to fight in each battle. Meaning,” she said. “Someone who enters Odawara as a representative can attack a representative of the enemy

forces in each battle. This was always about duels and so many interests are intertwined that dividing it up is meaningless. This is a combination of a few different battles, so there is nothing wrong with an enemy becoming an ally or vice-versa as long as it follows the rules.”

“Wait,” said Mouri Terumoto.

She raised her right hand and pointed at Mogami’s *signe cadre*.

“Are you saying we won’t settle on our opponents yet?”

“Won’t this be easier if we don’t? For example, it means we can support another nation in a way not present in the history recreation.”

Masazumi knew what Mogami was alluding to. If they used the framework of “forces”, they could battle someone from an opposing force even if no such battle was found in the Testament.

For example, Mogami could side with Houjou as part of the Musashi force and thus battle a representative of the Hashiba force. That would allow them to earn a debt of gratitude from Musashi.

And Mogami would also be able to attack a Houjou representative as part of the anti-Odawara Hashiba force.

.../ see.

If they could use those classifications to freely choose their opponents, they could use the battles to hold their political dealings without being bound by the history recreation. When so many powerful forces were gathered on one battlefield, that felt like it would give everyone equal opportunities while just barely following the history recreation.

Vice President: “Mogami has the Kantou nations to the south, Date to the east, and Sviet Rus to the southwest. Is that what inspired this idea?”

“It is an interesting method. How about we decide on some rules?”

Houjou Ujinao waved a hand. She must have already come up with a general framework using her high-speed thoughts.

“Well, these are the customary rules for this type of duel. We can use them as the rules for the Odawara battlefield that is based on the Siege of Odawara.”

Battlefield Rules

- Each duel is limited to 30 minutes and a draw will not be counted as a victory.
- If there is a disagreement in the desired type of duel, a discussion will be held and each type will be used for 15 minutes.
- If the winner or loser are deemed fit to continue fighting, they may move to a different battlefield.
- After a duel is complete, the participants must wait an hour before fighting again.
- Divine transmissions on the battlefield will generally be restricted to those being sent out. Mutual communication can only be done at predetermined times or while the warrior is unable to fight.

...She went all out on that.

With that thought, Masazumi looked to the Mouri group.

Terumoto nodded back at her and then spoke to Houjou.

“Allowing people to fight in multiple duels expands the possibilities. As long as you know when to call it quits. ...We’re in.”

“In that case,” said Masazumi.

She had to announce something here as part of the negotiations.

Vice President: “Mogami Yoshiaki. ...If your representative loses in a duel against a non-Musashi force, we will compensate you for it.”

...She made that decision in a hurry!

Terumoto responded to the Musashi Vice President's word with a whistle in her heart.

That was a pretty decent decision.

At first glance, it appeared to be a way of gaining Mogami as an ally, but that was not the case. It was actually meant to *prevent Mogami from becoming an enemy*.

"The 'non-Musashi' and 'loses' conditions are key."

With those conditions, if Mogami lost to a non-Musashi enemy, they would have to give up their war interests to that other nation. But any costs caused by the actual fight would be compensated by Musashi.

That reduced the risk of loss for Mogami. With Musashi paying the battle costs, they could use their own funding for the interests given up if they lost.

However, that only applied if it happened to a "non-Musashi" nation.

That increased the risk of fighting a duel against Musashi.

For Musashi, this was not a problem as long as Mogami won. And even if they did lose, they only had to compensate for the money or materiel, not the real authority being fought over in these battles. If that secured them a fighting force on Mogami's level, they came out ahead.

...What are we going to do about it?

Mouri had become an isolated force in the Siege of Bitchu Takamatsu Castle.

And they were more or less the rear guard for the Siege of Odawara.

According to the Testament, Mouri Terumoto remained at the Kyoto Imperial Palace. When Hashiba left the center open, Mouri moved to fill it in.

...That just doesn't allow me to participate in this battle.

But there were some who had joined the Siege of Odawara.

"Masuda Motonaga and a few other commanders led the Mouri Navy in an attack on the Shimoda region, didn't they?"

"Testament," confirmed the Reine des Garous who sat behind her. She had inherited the name of Masuda Motonaga. "So I can actively participate in the

Siege of Odawara. The Testament describes how I make an attack on Shimoda Castle.”

“That’s all I needed to know.”

...For now, we have one person who can definitely make an attack in the Siege of Odawara.

And that person was the Reine des Garous. She was the strongest card they could send to this battlefield. However...

...Is there nothing else we can do?

At that point, Terumoto realized something.

She was being drawn into the Kantou negotiations and she was starting to want to fight this battle.

“—————”

She really had grown less reserved.

She had left Hexagone Française and temporarily lost its protection, so had that allowed her to spread her mental wings so she wanted to do something?

But, thought Terumoto before whispering to Mouri-01.

“Whether we win or lose, we still get two rights from Musashi by giving them the Logismo Oplo. So we don’t have to think about what we might win from them. ...We’re currently sending two people to the battlefield, but is there anything we can take from the non-Musashi nations with Seki and the Reine des Garous?”

“Testament. If we could take control of Houjou, we would be in position to secure a route from the east of the continent to the south when we develop the outside world. That would also be possible from Sviet Rus, but their land in the outside world is just as frigid. Going through Russia would be the shortest route, but...”

“It would be easier to take a detour south and reach the outside world’s Mediterranean through the Red Sea.”

In that case...

“Houjou’s rights would be nice to have.”

During the afternoon meeting, Houjou had said they would be sending in personnel from Mouri as well. But when they thought about it...

...The more Houjou representatives, the greater the odds of taking some rights from them.

That may have been a crazy idea, but it was true. And Terumoto wanted to avoid sending in Mouri personnel as much as possible. So...

“Isn’t there anywhere we could find a convenient fighting force?”

“Then, Princess.” Mouri-01 opened a *signe cadre*. “There is one thing we might be able to use to participate in the Siege of Odawara. How would you use this?”

She held something out as she asked that question. It was...

“A transport ship...!?”

Masazumi heard Terumoto calling to someone.

“Hey, Ootani! Yeah, you!”

“Testament! What is it, Mouri Terumoto!? And why are you acting like you’re better than me!?”

“You’re one to talk!”

Did they all respond in unison as a way to strengthen their solidarity?

But Terumoto pointed at Ootani with her attitude intact.

“Mouri will cover your lodging costs in Izu, so send someone to fight for Houjou in the Siege of Odawara!”

...Huh? What is this all of a sudden?

Ootani seemed to be thinking the same thing. He immediately shook his head.

“I have no idea what you are talking about, Mouri Terumoto!”

...I have to agree there.

“Hey, Mouri Terumoto,” said Masazumi. “What is the meaning of this?”

“Testament. I’ll explain. ...During the Siege of Odawara, I stay at the Kyoto Imperial Palace.”

“Yes, that’s what the Testament says.”

“Right,” agreed Terumoto. But then she pointed at Ootani again. “But during the Siege of Odawara, the Mouri Navy did more than just send in Masuda Motonaga’s group. It also supported Hashiba’s invasion by providing naval transport. Mouri commanded that transport and was in the west, but...”

Terumoto smiled.

“The attack on Odawara was only possible with Mouri’s logistical support, so it’s only fair that you send us at least one fighter, right? ...I’ll be using them to support Houjou, though.”

Ootani felt a data entity’s version of fear.

He did not quite understand what Terumoto was saying, but a part of him understood that she was correct as far as the meaning went.

He understood, yet did not understand. But to make sure her meaning got through...

“...You want us to supply a fighter!? That you will give to Houjou!?”

“Testament, that’s how the history recreation works, right? We’ll provide logistical support just like back then, so give us some rights. As a reward for helping with the attack on Odawara.”

And just as Terumoto said that...

Wakisaka silently raised her hand.

“This puts us at a disadvantage, you know?”

“That’s right,” said Yoshiaki. “With a fleet battle, we could have joined the aerial battle as Zwei Fürstin. With a ground battle, we could have bombed them as Zwei Fürstin. That was the plan, but now they’re just doing duels. The flying *schale besen* is what makes a Technohexen, so a duel where the two of us can’t

share the battlefield is a real pain.”

“So you two would be at a slight disadvantage?”

“It’d be better to say we normally wouldn’t be a part of it at all.”

“The records show that Musashi’s Weiss Hexen fought a duel in England...”

“Are you trying to provoke us?” Yoshiaki smiled bitterly. “Fine, then. Angie, prepare to head out. They have a spot for Hashiba there too.”

“Testament. This sure is depressing, Kime-chan. So who will take which spot?”

Yoshiaki pointed at herself with no expression in her eyes.

“I will fight for Houjou via Mouri. Healing spells are a Weiss Hexen technique, so I can still make it back if something happens. Angie, you fight for Hashiba.”

“Kime-chan, are you mad?”

“Why would I be?” Yoshiaki tilted her head. “The Ten Spears exist to fight if the need arises.”

“I-I’m sorry!” Ootani prostrated himself on the embankment. “I will have fully recovered in another 27 hours! So make use of me after that!”

“Do you think he’d recover faster if we shoved some ether fuel up his butt, Angie?”

“Oh, I do have an Orei Metallo. A fist-sized one.”

“W-wait!” protested Ootani. “What are you planning!?”

“If you really don’t know, you must have been damaged worse than we thought.”

“We’d better heal you up real quick.”

The Technohexen both locked their eyes on him, so he took a step back.

“Waaaait! Heeeeeelp meeeeeeeee!”

Just then, they heard a new voice.

“Sorry I’m late!”

Someone charged onto the embankment from the right.

They were out of breath and had ivy and leaves tangled around their shoulders and head.

“Kani Saizou here! ...It is 18:06 and I somehow managed to arrive!”

Terumoto watched the *signe cadre* image of Ootani standing on the embankment.

He was still in his Mouse form, but he was scattering light.

“Testament, we have reached a conclusion. We will provide a fighter that can be transferred to Houjou: Hashiba’s Ten Spears #4...Katou Yoshiaki.”

“That’s a pretty major name. I appreciate it,” said Terumoto. “Okay. If she wins, we’ll do more than just cover your lodging costs. We’ll promise not to send Mouri’s preserved forces to defend Paris in Hexagone Française. Of course, most of them are here.”

“Testament. Knowing you will not attempt it after the battle is enough.”

...He’s pretty sharp.

They had no plans to try anything during the battle. But she had considered making an attack while Hashiba was on their Great Return after the battle.

But then Ootani had made that comment.

...Maybe we should attack the Great Return anyway...

She had a variety of thoughts on the matter, but it would all depend on what happened at Paris. For now...

“What will you be doing for the Hashiba side of things?”

“Testament. ...We will send Kani Saizou who works for the Ten Spears. She can act in Fukushima and the others’ stead.”

“Oh,” said the Musashi Secretary as he peered into the sign frame showing Ootani.

But the named individual was nowhere to be seen. They could only hear her voice.

“Ah! Dumplings! I love dumplings! Thank you very much!”

“Kanitama, if that’s enough to excite you, what do you have to say about this?”

“Ah! A banana! Like for a monkey! I’ll take it!!”

“Make sure to brush your teeth later.”

They were all very noisy.

...At any rate, I guess we did what we could to benefit from this.

And just as Terumoto sighed...

“Then we would like to base our participation on the Punishment of Aizu’s history recreation.”

Sviet Rus’s Honjou Shigenaga spoke up.

Shigenaga had left the audience chamber.

Inside the stone hall, the side effects of Ivan the Terrible’s healing spell were causing some noise on the divine transmission line, so she left the compressed space hall and entered the corridor.

“I would like to confirm something about the current participants.”

“...The number of people?”

“Exactly. ...Allow me to list up the people who have been suggested from each group.”

- **Houjou: Ujinao, Ujiteru, Genan, Kotarou, Yoshiaki**
- **Musashi: 3 people**
- **Mogami: Yoshiaki, Yoshiyasu**
- **Hashiba: Kani**
- **Uesugi: TBD**

- **Takigawa: Takigawa, 3 from Sanada**
- **Date: Narumi**
- **Mouri: Seki, Reine des Garous**

“Got that? Looking at this as the Siege of Odawara, the Houjou/Musashi alliance has 8 people. On the other hand, the Hashiba/Mouri alliance has only 3 when Uesugi is left out. Filling the remaining 5 slots is too great a burden for Uesugi.”

“Then,” responded a voice.

It was Genan from Houjou.

He raised his hood and the eyes below turned toward her. The eyes viewing her had prominent whites.

“We have no choice but to bring P.A. Oda into this. ...Takigawa Ichimasu, you’re listening, aren’t you?”

Shigenaga responded to Genan’s call by expanding her divine transmission authorization. She activated extra security and then expanded authorization to include not just her own nation and friendly nations but neighboring nations as well. And...

“Sounds good. ...It would be worth our while to agree.”

The divine transmission displayed the end of sunset.

There was a large body of water at the ground and mountains were visible in the distance.

“This is P.A. Oda’s Takigawa Ichimasu. ...We’re setting up Kanie Castle right now, but I’d like to accept your proposal.”

“That was close...!” said Kakei in the woods near the lake.

They were currently constructing the Kanie Castle’s defenses now that it had landed in the artificial lake.

Kanie Castle was a 300m aerial warship, but it was no more than a fortress

when not in the air. They had to investigate which points of the artificial lake were prone to attack or approach.

...Simply having the cannons pre-aimed at the vulnerable points makes a huge difference.

But Takigawa's divine transmission had brought Kakei to a stop.

"We would appreciate it if we were made a part of those duels," she said.

That's true, he thought.

In a ground battle, they would be outnumbered. They could somewhat overcome that with adequate effort, but it would still put them at a disadvantage. That was why they were preparing for the ground battle here, but if they could change that to a series of duels, Takigawa's decision was exactly right.

"Political decisions really can change destiny, can't they?"

This had gone well, and that was why it was only "close".

Oh, I can see the bridge through the trees from here, thought Kakei as he took a break.

...How will these duels turn out?

They had revealed most of what they could do the other night.

They did have other options, but how far would those take them?

"I can't help but wonder," he muttered just as Takigawa's voice reached him over the divine transmission.

"Definitely include us in the duels for the punishment of Houjou. We agree to that. But," she said. "Our ground battle will remain unchanged. ...We will hold that ground battle in parallel to the duels. So when you send your fighters in to attack, send all your warriors with them."

"Hold on, Takigawa-san. ...Just the duels would be safer."

"Don't chicken out, Kakei Juuzou."

Takigawa spoke within the vanishing sunlight atop the Kanie Castle's bridge.

"You see...I have no intention of losing to Musashi in this battle."

Takigawa could guess Kakei was on the east lakeside.

If he was inspecting how the bridge would look, then he would be in the woods there.

...Oh, there he is.

He looked to her and lightly raised his hand, so she knew he could see her.

He was a good ninja. Not many of those under her command were on his level.

Since he had left P.A. Oda, she could only call it a luxury to have him fighting for her.

And she herself was a luxury too. So...

"Listen, Kakei. The thing about Houjou, Mouri, and Musashi is, they're planning to start the major Kantou Liberation battle after the Siege of Odawara. So they want to settle this battle with duels to minimize their losses. They would rather let their most powerful fighters settle it directly than to lose their general warriors, aerial ships, and gods of war. That method is only possible for nations with plenty of powerful fighters to draw on."

Don't you hate that?

"Of course, P.A. Oda is large enough to do the same. But we can't at the moment. That's probably why they brought the duel idea to us."

...Do you understand?

Takigawa spoke like she was admonishing Kakei.

"Even if they have lost their power, a commander from a powerful nation like P.A. Oda can't survive by accepting the enemy's suggested safe method. ...To demonstrate the stubborn pride of being left with a portion of that great nation, I will not run away."

"Isn't that more folly than pride?"

"I said it was a stubborn pride, didn't I?"

That was it.

“Besides, if we accepted the duels, what would we say to the others who end up fighting Musashi in the Kantou Liberation? If all of them were fighting while I was spared, I’d die of shame.”

“...And? You’re telling us to go along with you on this?”

“If we go that far, we can call it the Second Siege of Ueda, can’t we?”

“True enough,” replied Kakei.

That settled it.

She breathed in and felt the chill of the early night.

She smelled the water and forest. It was a luxurious atmosphere for a ninja born in the deserts of P.A. Oda.

She felt the heat in her exhaled breath.

“The Sanada ninjas under my command can take a thousand warriors each. So you’ll need an army of that size to fight a fair ‘duel’.”

“I see. ...Musashi, what will you do?”

Masazumi hid a sigh in her heart when she heard Mogami’s question.

...Well, we’re effectively sending the Satomi Student Council President and Date Vice Chancellor, so Musashi has already supplied two people.

That the Date Vice Chancellor would be on the enemy side was a bit of a problem.

But, thought Masazumi as she raised a hand.

“You want our excuse for attacking each enemy force, right?”

“Such as?” asked Mogami. “What is it? Answer me.”

“Judge,” said Masazumi. “Houjou.”

Because...

“We want something from Houjou. ...There are some ruins from the Age of

Dawn below Houjou and we want the right to enter and inspect them.”

Tenzou observed Ujinao’s behavior.

She kept her eyes closed while her automaton body controlled her actions.

“—————”

She was silent and did not even stir. However, she soon opened her mouth a crack.

“You would bet your nation’s battle results on something as nonsensical as that?”

“Yes. ...It means something to us. And even if it does not, simply confirming that it does not would be meaningful enough.”

“Is that so?” said Ujinao while still not making a single movement.

In that case, thought Tenzou.

...What is in the Houjou ruins?

The center relief had been carved away below both Novgorod and Sanada.

The round ceiling had depicted people forming a ring and celebrating whatever had been in the middle.

They had been told the relief remained in Houjou, but...

“Now...”

As far as he could tell, Ujinao was familiar with it.

But it felt like she did not know what it meant and did not see it as valuable.

Why was that?

Of course, Ujinao would not answer them now that she knew it had political meaning.

Vice President: “Ahh... If I’d found a cleverer way of asking that, she might have told us for free...”

Silver Wolf: “No, you shouldn’t treat any of this too cheaply.”

Unturning: “Judge. Even if you did get the answer that way, it would hurt your mutual relationship if she later learned it was so important.”

Mal-Ga: “Couldn’t we just say it’s her fault for letting us trick her?”

Tachibana Wife: “Act like that on the international stage and you won’t have any allies left.”

While hearing Naruze agree with that, Masazumi relaxed her shoulders in her heart.

She needed to loosen up.

Neshinbara’s intensity may have been infectious.

...But, well, I guess I’ll say it.

“Our primary objective is Houjou and our secondary is Mouri. That was always our intention. And we will take on Takigawa in parallel to that.”

“Testament. As your primary opponent, I hope we can properly face each other.”

Houjou Ujinao made a sweep of her arm.

That opened a largish sign frame. It displayed a simple map of Odawara.

Odawara Castle, which was already flooded, was in the center and the city was to the south.

Past a shallow forest north of Odawara Castle was an artificial lake.

“Takigawa’s Kanie Castle is in the center of this. Considering the distance from there to Odawara City, we can supply a battlefield covering this area of about 15km north to south and 5km east to west.”

Meaning...

“I will be in Odawara Castle’s central plaza. It seems to me all of the duels can be held within this battle territory.”

“...Oh. So anything goes, even surprise attacks and traps?”

“Win and you gain rights on the level of national policy. The duels have already been announced and the declaration of war has been prepared. ...Sviet

Rus, you have the farthest to travel, so when will you arrive?"

"Before noon tomorrow, I imagine."

"Testament. Then we will start at 1 PM tomorrow. Until then, we will clear the city and have the residences outside the territory evacuated just to be safe. Also..."

Houjou Ujinao turned toward the Musashi group.

Her hair swayed a bit.

"After the Siege of Odawara, Houjou will be part of the Matsudaira forces."

"Then what do you want to do?"

"Testament." Ujinao nodded. And, "We will move to the outside world. We would like your support in that."

"We would like a permanent home even if we are destroyed," said Ujinao. "But in the current state of provisional rule, the dual structure between the Far East and the rest of the world causes conflicting falls and rises, which is not conducive to stability. ...We would like to calm that reincarnation cycle of destruction and rebirth."

So...

"In exchange for handing over this land, we will seek a land of rebirth. ...How about that?"

Houjou too, huh? thought Terumoto.

Developing the outside world was not something that could be done with halfhearted methods or power.

But she realized that Houjou had the military might necessary.

They had automatons and gods of war that could function in extreme environments. Their aerial ship development had focused on mechanical phoenixes and was primarily composed of near-ocean transport ships, but...

...They just need Musashi and the Far East's support there.

Looking back, Houjou's actions had been consistent.

...If they were after the Kantou Liberation so they could free up the Kantou nations and pave a path to the outside world, then she did a good job planning it out.

Houjou's part of the outside world would be on the south of the continent, so they could travel along the coast when coming from the east. And traveling south would likely give them better weather conditions than to the north.

So for Houjou, they just had to get the Kantou nations moving. Once that happened, they could start from the east of the continent and safely travel to their land.

And Houjou had long interacted with the Kantou nations, so they would earn a lot of trust if they helped liberate Kantou.

However, that would complicate Mouri's position.

Before the meeting during the day, Mouri had planned to acquire Musashi's authority and carry out the Kantou Liberation. But...

...Outsiders like us wouldn't be able to immediately gain their trust.

If they used an intermediary, it would have to be Houjou who worked with them on the Kantou Liberation. So...

“———”

Terumoto concluded that Houjou had planned to act as their intermediary and to use them.

...Houjou would probably maintain their position as an intermediary between us and the Kantou nations while insisting we could reach Europe faster through a southern route.

If they followed Houjou's advice and took a southern route, they would reach the Indian land Houjou sought.

Mouri would be forced to help develop that land to reach Europe.

Houjou was earning debts of gratitude with the conquerors of Europe and the

Kantou nations to ensure the safety of their own land.

...Honestly.

In the end, Musashi had intervened and Houjou lost the right to lead the endeavor.

But now they were asking Musashi to assist in developing the south of the continent.

Even though Mouri would have to help develop that land.

Would you say they thoroughly used others? The frightening part was how they purely used others for their own goals instead of just growing reliant on them.

She really is the clingy type, was Terumoto's assessment of Houjou Ujinao.

Meanwhile, Ujinao spoke to Musashi.

"Can we receive land development support in exchange for handing over Houjou's land?"

What'll it be? thought Terumoto as she looked to the Musashi Vice President.

Musashi could not just support a single nation, so they would be required to supply this support to every nation.

...But that isn't what Houjou's trying to do here.

She would cling to Musashi in an attempt to drag out the support she wanted. That was Ujinao's method.

Terumoto was curious how the Musashi Vice Chancellor would respond to this negotiation.

A moment later, she heard a voice.

It was the Musashi Secretary. He had already closed his sign frame, faced Ujinao, and opened his mouth.

"That would not be possible."

Neshinbara spoke slowly.

He did not need to provoke his opponent here, so he sent out his words and the meaning they contained.

“Houjou will join Matsudaira’s forces. After that, you will be with us, not some other entity.”

“You mean...?”

“Judge.” Neshinbara nodded. “If you want to go to the outside world’s India, that will be our task.”

“...And when will that happen?”

“Who can say?”

He did not know, so he was not about to give an answer.

Of course, that response would anger her.

...It’s coming, isn’t it?

Ujinao wrinkled her brow like this was a self-evident fact.

“You cannot be that flippant about-...”

“Can you not wait? Are you going to head out there on your own instead of waiting?”

“Of course we will! We must acquire our freedom after our fall!”



“I see. So you’ll be leaving. That’s too bad.”

Neshinbara sighed. He made a show of it. Everything about it was exaggerated.

“Yes, it really is too bad you’ll be leaving to develop the outside world.”

“...Is that a problem?”

“Judge.” Neshinbara frowned. “Does this mean you won’t be marrying Noriki-kun?”

“Then I will not leave.”

She immediately responded.

Hiro heard a splash of water from a position past the torii at the entrance of the Suwa Shrine.

The hand-washing station was located past the torii and Noriki had just plunged his head into the 10m-long stone pool.

The spray splashed up and finally Noriki lifted his head.

Hiro spoke to her upperclassman who was dripping water onto the ground.

“...You sure have a dynamic hand-washing method.”

“I had a feeling things are about to get too hot for comfort.”

“...That might be a spiritual misunderstanding, you know?”

“Might be.”

He isn’t any more normal than the rest of them, thought Hiro as she watched Noriki shake his head.

He sighed, got up, and then washed his hands properly. He was extra thorough with the right hand, so he may have been thinking about his spell.

“Feeling nervous?”

When she asked that, he set down the water scoop and looked up into the sky.

The shrine was in the forest, so the light in the sky felt overly bright as night fell.

But he looked to the southern night sky which led to Houjou land.

“I’m a bit nervous my power won’t arrive fast enough. ...Even if I have worked it all out already.”

“Ujinao! Ujinaooo! What kind of response was that!?”

“That’s right! That family moved to another nation, so why would you suddenly say you want to marry one of them!?”

Masazumi kept a mental distance as she watched Ujiteru and Genan press Ujinao for an answer.

In her opinion...

...Yeah...

Half of her was in agreement and half of her was sympathetic.

But Ujinao tilted her head toward the other two.

“You two are going to die, so what does it matter to you? Oh, right. You are already dead, great-uncle, so you should care even less.”

“Y-you were the one saying we are the dead!”

“Not to worry. Houjou will be crushed, so all of us will – without a doubt – be dead. It is just that I will have a second life.”

“Do you really think you alone will be allowed that!? Well!?”

Ujinao had an immediate response for Ujiteru.

“No one will allow it. Not even I will allow it. ...But that is why he will come to destroy me.”

Girls: “Ohhh...”

Marube-ya: “Man, this will be really bad if Noriki-kun screws it up. We’ll probably see Armageddon start in India. Anyone want to blow the trumpet?”

Flat Vassal: “I had thought the Houjou Chancellor was a pretty crazy person, but does this mean she’s actually a pretty crazy maiden in love?”

Mal-Ga: “Crazy, blade-happy, dual personalities, clingy, self-interested, and a need to monopolize? It’s like she gathered all the negative aspects of women.”

Novice: “Have you ever even seen a mirror? Just once?”

Mal-Ga: “What do you say, Margot?”

Gold Mar: “I say you’re cute, Ga-chan!”

Asama: “...Anyway, I can see now why Neshinbara-kun was able to negotiate with Houjou-san. He’s always in touch with that kind of heavy atmosphere.”

Righteousness: “How about all of you take a look in the mirror...?”

Nine Tail Girl: “You require further training, Yoshiyasu. ...Now. What will Houjou do?”

“Judge.” Masazumi nodded. “After the Kantou Liberation, I think we will grant Houjou the right to manage the Sagami land for Matsudaira.”

“You mean...?”

An emotion responded to Houjou Ujinao’s voice.

It was Mogami Yoshiaki’s “ko ko” of laughter.

She spread her fan and pointed south, toward them.

“That is the same as us. ...The right to manage Matsudaira’s land is essentially a command to govern even after we have been destroyed. We will return to our land as mere managers instead of self governing. We will of course have to carry out the unreasonable demands of our superiors and to collect taxes for them, but...”

Yoshiaki looked to Ujinao.

And she narrowed her eyes.

“We will already be dead, so we will feel no pain, will we?”

Thank you for that, thought Masazumi with a sigh.

Then she looked to Mogami Yoshiaki on the sign frame.

“Mogami Yoshiaki. I would like to thank you for responding to our summons today. Ask for anything you would like.”

“Remember the trade route binding Kantou and Oushuu we agreed to in a previous meeting? Will you construct the ground portion to Mogami first?”

Masazumi understood the meaning behind that request.

The trade route connecting Oushuu, Jouetsu, and Kantou had been agreed to at the three-nations meeting, but Mogami was asking to be given priority in its construction.

...That means...

Money Lover: “Allow me to interject. Constructing a trade route means to build the intermediary business districts. In other words, Mogami wants the earliest control of those intermediary business districts. ...She is probably especially interested in the large hub market that will connect Mogami and the other nations to Edo.”

Vice President: “What would happen then?”

Money Lover: “Mogami would enter those intermediary business districts first and take control. On the other hand, Sviet Rus, Date, and we would be treated like outsiders. ...If that happened, Date and Sviet Rus would still have a trade route, but they would have little control over anything outside of their own territory. And it would be a problem for me as well.”

...So for Date and Sviet Rus, this would obstruct their movements.

The Treasurer was irrelevant, but she still could not approve *this*.

However, Mogami had already made their move. If Mogami’s request was denied, either she would refuse to cooperate or she could even betray them during the battle the following day.

...What should I do?

And just as Masazumi asked herself that...

“Oh? You haven’t touched the food at your table. How about everyone trades

places?”

A crossdresser walked out onto the road while carrying a pot.

...Trade places!

Ujinao was hopeful. She could finally say goodbye to the Far Eastern food in front of her. She wanted the Western food, but the Musashi food would be an acceptable compromise.

“Umm, you’ve probably made decent progress in the meeting, so how about you take a break for that?”

Great idea, Musashi Chancellor! thought Ujinao as she prepared herself.

...Can we move to the Far Eastern food!?

Terumoto was hopeful. The Reine des Garous started laughing behind her, but she ignored that. However...

“Okay.”

C’mon, Far Eastern food! No, we’ll be going to it! thought Terumoto as she clapped her hands together in her heart.

Just then, the Musashi Vice President raised her right hand between Terumoto and the Far Eastern food.

“Wait!”

Masazumi spoke to the Sviet Rus and Mogami sign frames visible overhead.

“Here’s what we can do about the trade route.”

Narumi gave a light snort behind her, but Masazumi decided not to think too hard about whether that was out of caution or hope. Masazumi then brought everyone to a stop.

“Listen.”

She first had to speak to Mogami.

“We will accept Mogami’s request. The trade route’s construction will give priority to the area between Mogami and Edo.”

“Oh...?” Yoshiaki lifted the corners of her mouth and her shoulders shook up and down. “You of course are not accepting it as-is, are you? But try to pull a fast one and this fox will strike back.”

“I am aware. That is why I have a suggestion.”

Masazumi prefaced with what she had to say first.

“You know which nation the trade route’s central corridor will be located in, don’t you? Where the trade routes between the three nations and Edo coincide will become an especially major commercial region.”

No one nodded in response.

Narumi kept her arms crossed.

Sviet Rus’s Shigenaga returned a sharp but silent gaze.

And Mogami kept her eyes narrowed.

They were all prepared to speak if they were dissatisfied.

In front of them, Masazumi looked to the surrounding tables and breathed in.

...Far Eastern food, Western food, and Musashi cuisine, hm?

If those three varieties of food were divided into separate tables, there was only one solution.

“Each of your nations will take turns managing that central commercial region for three years. ...And Mogami goes first.”

Mogami responded to the idea by briefly widened her eyes but then laughing. With her face hidden behind her fan.

“You got us there...!”

“Ko ko.” Yoshiaki laughed in her throat with the night clouds in the sky behind her. “Taking turns managing the commercial region? ...That’s a pretty good idea.”

It would prevent the corruption that would be inevitable if a single nation remained in control and it would eliminate fatigue since the color of the commercial region would change depending on the nation in charge.

...The main problems will be the handoff and the homes for the people who stay there during the three-year period.

Of course, Musashi specialized in that kind of thing. They swapped out their Chancellor and Student Council President every year and the construction and replacement of residential districts was a technique developed for the Musashi environment.

That may have been why the idea occurred to them in the first place. Also...

“Sviet Rus, Date? ...Which of you will go second?”

That would be for Musashi to decide.

And they would find a basis for that decision very soon.

“You can of course abandon your right to a spot in the rotation, but I am on board. And Musashi is too. That means the trade route will certainly be developed between Mogami and Edo. If you lose your chance here, it will be all too obvious who will fall behind in the years to come.”

After all...

“Mogami will eventually disappear. And like a lingering ghost, the land of Ushuu will be fully developed afterwards. Ushuu will not be hindered by politics or war, so prosperity is the only option for us.”

Now, thought Yoshiaki with a smile.

She faced forward.

She stared far to the south. The white board visible to the left was the Ariake. And to the southwest of that...

...Ohh.

She could see Musashi in the distance.

Just how far was it from the Musashi to her Yamagata Castle?

But she would cover that distance tonight.

And, she thought as she looked down from the bridge.

She saw forests and mountains below. The mountains still had some snow in this land.

All of that would finally be connected to that southern land. And to ensure that...

“The Siege of Odawara and the Kantou Liberation. ...We will be taking a decent three years for ourselves. And we get to go first. ...What will you do, Date, Sviet Rus? Thoughtlessly following a fox’s footprints through the snow will only get you tricked back the way you came.”

“Fine. Date will accept that suggestion.”

“Same. Sviet Rus also accepts.”

Masazumi heard the representatives of those two nations.

...I thought as much.

Worshiper: “That is a good decision. Mogami is in fact a major agricultural nation, but Date and Sviet Rus have their own products and trade goods that create different commercial profits. Even if Mogami gets a three-year head start to mold the central commercial region in their image, Date and Sviet Rus must think they can still recover.”

Flat Vassal: “Could you put that more simply?”

Unturning: “From Date’s viewpoint, the Kantou Liberation will give us a sea route to Edo which can function as a trade route for aerial ships. On the other hand, Mogami is trapped to the east, west, and south by Date and Sviet Rus, so they must have wanted to secure that trade route no matter what.”

Marube-ya: “So if Mogami gains control of the primary trade region, they will set up rules that eliminate tolls and tariffs even after their turn ends. That way, being surrounded won’t be too much of a disadvantage.”

Unturning: “Also, Sviet Rus can trade with Kyou and the Eastern European nations using sea routes to gain the same thing they would get with this trade route. They might be the biggest buyers of Mogami’s rice, so they should not be

in a hurry to have their 3 years. In fact, they would prefer to use it as a port for Eastern Europe once the market has become more established.”

Tachibana Wife: “Thank you for that valuable information concerning tomorrow’s Siege of Odawara.”

Flat Vassal: “...Eh? What do you mean?”

The Tachibana Wife nodded at Adele’s question.

The Date Vice Chancellor said “ah” and placed a hand over her mouth, but the Tachibana Wife did not turn her way.

Tachibana Wife: “If they are in no hurry for their 3 years, Uesugi will not need to fight for an earlier spot in the trade management lineup.”

In other words...

Tachibana Wife: “There is a good chance that Sviet Rus will be our enemy. That is what this means.”

That was well done, thought Masazumi while looking to the Tachibana Wife and the Date Vice Chancellor.

She was not sure what had the latter girl so embarrassed, but there must have been some emotions involved there.

But to sum it all up...

“Have we seen the general lineup and interests of each nation? Then I would like to work out the exact number of people.”

“Uesugi will send me – Honjou Shigenaga – and one other person.”

“Who is that other?”

“We have not actually decided yet. We just know we need two fighters for the Keichou-Dewa Conflict.”

“I see,” said Asama while rewriting her document. “So is this right?”

- **Houjou: Ujinao, Ujiteru, Genan, Kotarou, Yoshiaki**

- **Musashi: 3 people**
- **Mogami: Yoshiaki, Yoshiyasu**
- **Hashiba: Kani**
- **Uesugi: Honjou, 1 other**
- **Takigawa: Takigawa, 3 from Sanada**
- **Date: Narumi**
- **Mouri: Seki, Reine des Garous**

I see, thought Masazumi.

“So these are the people who will be fighting tomorrow.”

There were 20 in all. Some of them had yet to be named and those were generally from Musashi, but the other nations were sending some very powerful people.

Masazumi began to wonder what Musashi could gain in duels against them.

...That will depend on the outcome tomorrow.

So, she thought before speaking up.

“That brings the meeting to an end. ...I would like to leave the rest until we have the results of the Siege of Odawara tomorrow, but is that fine with all of you?”

“...Testament.”

They all seemed to be in agreement, so that signaled the end of the current meeting.

...A lot happened here.

She felt like most of that was Neshinbara’s fault, but she was also to blame since she had not found a reason to intervene.

At the moment, she saw everyone sigh and relax their shoulders.

Most likely, each group would start by speaking amongst themselves before eventually intermingling.

Masazumi thought to herself in that atmosphere that could be seen as lazy or liberated.

...Why have Houjou Ujinao and Mouri Terumoto been glaring at me like that?

Well, it doesn't matter, she decided while reaching for a seaweed rice cake with cheese and taking a bite.

She felt like Houjou and Mouri were glaring at her even more, but she decided to ignore it.

Asama realized everyone's movements had grown more relaxed.

The meeting had ended.

Information would still be exchanged and deals would still be made, but no one would directly determine the direction their nation took.

...So I should probably stop recording now.

She decided to leave the stealth defense barrier in place and set up a "meeting over" sign frame at the entrance. She walked to the fence's entrance to do so and Horizon followed her. Horizon must have realized she had some task to complete.

"Asama-sama, is there anything I can help with?"

"Oh, no. I'm fine. I'm only placing a sign at the entrance."

"Judge."

Horizon nodded but still followed her.

That sense of togetherness made Asama smile.

...Horizon can just do things with people now, can't she?

She no longer either stuck with him or stood staring off into space.

So Asama did not reject her company as she continued toward the entrance.

Then she heard a voice from up ahead.

It came from beyond the arch at the fence entrance.

“Um.”

It was a male voice, but a high-pitched one. Asama had an immediate reaction to it: *...I've heard this voice before?*

She could have sworn she had.

But she could not place it. It was an odd contradiction.

Regardless, the person showed themselves. Since the security had allowed them in, they must have been from one of the groups in attendance.

A short boy walked in through the arch. With that and how slender he was, he looked younger than her.

She saw gray hair and somewhat almond-shaped eyes.

He carried some luggage and lowered his somewhat thick eyebrows.

“Um, I was told I should come here...”

“Oh?” Horizon nodded. “Sir, this is currently the greatest danger zone in the Far East.”

“E-ehh?”

“W-wait, Horizon. You can't just hit someone with the truth when you've only just met.”

“Nicely said, Asama-sama. Now, sir, welcome to this aggressive world. ...What brings you here today?”

“Oh, right,” he said. And just then...

“Honey!”

With that cry, a great mass suddenly shot between him and the girls.

It was Mito's mother.

She more or less enveloped the person who had just arrived.

“Nnn.”

And she kissed him as if latching her jaws onto him.

...Eh!?

Before Asama could express her surprise, Mito's mother moved her lips down his neck, removed his shirt, and reached for his pants.

"W-wait, mother! What do you think you're doing!?"

The mother glanced over toward Mitotsudaira.

"What are you talking about, Nate? We do this all the time at home."

"We are outside! Outside!! And in front of someone else's house! Also..."

Asama and Horizon could only follow the exchange with their eyes bouncing back and forth.

This isn't going to develop into a mother-daughter fight, is it? worried Asama, but a sudden voice stopped them.

The half-stripped young man turned toward Mitotsudaira with a smile.

"Nate! I'm glad to see you're doing well!"

That turned everyone's eyes toward Mitotsudaira.

The silver wolf's cheeks flushed from the focus, but she eventually held her head high.

After looking to Asama, Horizon, and the crossdresser who had approached to spy on the event, she opened her mouth.

"Everyone...my king? This is my father."

She opened a sign frame to introduce him.

"On the Hexagone Française side, he has inherited the name of Turenne's rival, the Prince of Condé. On the Far Eastern side, he has inherited the name of Shimizu Kageharu."

Asama looked at Mitotsudaira's father and joined everyone in an "oh?" of interest.

He had to be about the same age as the rest of their fathers, but the Reine des Garous's divine protection must have had an effect.

...He looks so young...

He may have looked even younger than them.

He was also short, skinny, and being embraced by Mitotsudaira's mother from behind. There was only one way to describe it.

"Yeah..."

Asama and everyone else turned toward Mitotsudaira.

"He's exactly how I imagined him..."

"Wh-what is that supposed to mean!?"

It meant exactly what it sounded like it meant.

"Now, this won't be the usual method, but how about we begin sparring?"

Some of the twilight color remained in the western sky as Kiyomasa's voice joined the festival drums and flutes echoing through the air.

She and Fukushima had come to the same place.

"It feels weird to be back on the ironclad ship's outdoor pool just like the other day, but this is the closest match to the footing during your earlier pursuit, isn't it?"

They stood on the pool surface.

A floating duckboard had been set up across the pool so they had a surface to stand out.

They both wore swimsuits with their track suit and gym clothes on top, but...

"Kiyo-dono... Is there any real reason for this battlefield and footing?"

"Testament. You will understand soon enough."

Kiyomasa rotated her weapon in her right hand.

That weapon was Caledfwlch.

The pair of scythe-shaped spears could be combined into a single sword, but...

"I have partially reduced the thruster power for ease-of-use this time. And since we are only sparring, all of its attacks will be converted into blunt impacts.

Your Ichinotani will do the same, right?”

“Testament. How will we determine the winner?”

“How about we keep going until we are both satisfied?”

“Until thou are, Kiyo-dono...?”

Kiyomasa smiled a little at that question.

She exposed the light scar remaining on her neck.

“I want to reclaim my honor before this fades. But...”

She lightly shook her body using Caledfwlch’s rotating momentum.

“Facing Katou Danzou will likely be your job, Fukushima-sama.”

With that, Kiyomasa moved forward.

And a moment later...

...*Eh?*

She suddenly saw the color black before her.

That blackness flowed like a serpent as it rose in front of her. It was the color of hair and its movement was Fukushima’s ponytail fluttering behind her.

The distance between them was reduced to zero in an instant. And just as she realized that...

“—————”

Fukushima silently launched her attack.

Chapter 39: Girls Thinking in the Night

第三十九章

『夜中の思案娘達』



ここに来たのは
大事だと思ったから
ここにいるのは
大事だと解ったから
配点 (認める)

I came here

Because I thought it was important

I am here

Because I realized it was important

Point Allocation (Acceptance)

Fukushima viewed the sky.

She saw only a few clouds in that night sky, but what shapes were floating there were illuminated from below by the festival being held on the ironclad ships and by the lights of Paris.

The clouds were moving slowly. But...

...Huh?

Fukushima felt the cold. And it came from behind. The back of her head, neck, back, arms, hips, butt, legs, and heels all sank into the cold like they had been grabbed.

She heard a quiet splash.

And just as she heard that sound and the water reached her ears...

"...!?"

She sat up while surrounded by spray.

...Umm.

She looked around.

She was in the pool. She could see the rows of festival lanterns along the pool horizon and she saw the roofs of the festival stands below those.

Someone stood there with the scene and lights as her background.

It was Kiyomasa.

She held the combined form of Caledfwlch in her right hand and she was smiling.

“Fukushima-sama, you are wide open.”

“Oh, um, uh.”

Fukushima scrambled to her feet.

...When did that happen?

She had no idea what had caused her current situation.

She only remembered leaping in to make an attack.

But at some point, she had collapsed.

She had not been hit and knocked out.

...Then what...?

She did not know.

She did not understand what had happened to her. But Kiyomasa took a breath.

“I can do this as many times as it takes.”

“Do what thou just did?”

Fukushima took a crouching position on the duckboard.

“Fukushima-san! Kiyomasa-san! You started without me!”

Just then, Katagiri arrived from the stairs up to the pool area.

He quickly activated Hundred Crest Land Survey around him. He had the water trace and record their movements.

Someone else also climbed the stairs.

“Huh? You’re training even after completing your festival day quota?”

It was Hachisuka. She wore a jacket over a P.A. Oda-colored swimsuit.

“Well, I don’t mind. In fact, it’s fun to watch.”

“Testament. We will be working hard.”

With that, Fukushima moved forward. She did not understand how Kiyomasa had knocked her down, but the recorder had arrived and her spirit had not broken. So...

...Will I find an answer to why I failed during the day!?

She asked herself that as she charged toward Kiyomasa.

And a splashing reached her ears.

At the Main Blue Thunder, cleanup time on the road had come to an end.

Each nation's representatives were speaking with the others from their nation and quickly leaving.

The members of Class Plum were dismantling the fence, carrying out the tables, and gathering the trash in its appropriate place.

"Okay, you're dismissed, everyone. Masa, we could use your help fixing the outer wall and removing the fence. Also, are Tenzou and Shiro here? You two distribute some sweets to the neighbors."

The crossdresser gave his instructions and clapped his hands once to get everyone moving.

They all started home while thinking back on the busy day. However...

"...What am I going to do about this?" muttered Narumi on the way to Takao.

The half-dragon walked beside her. He carried a large bento box full of leftovers.

"Want some crab with cheese?"

"Sorry, but we have a similar dish in Date."

But he was only giving her a chance to speak. Probably, anyway. She seriously hoped he was not just going to open up that bento box.

He continued to walk.

That meant her hope was granted.

...Now, then.

He had started a conversation so she could speak, so how was she to respond?

Around them, the construction was still underway in central Musashino.

But after he took a few more steps...

“Should we sit down and eat?”

“...Is that what you wanted?”

“I cannot fight on an empty stomach.”

Hearing that, Narumi sighed as she walked.

“Were there any chicken dishes?”

“There was some soy sauce fried turkey.”

“Then I’ll have that.”

There were surprisingly few locations available to sit in the surface area.

She was still not used to life on the Musashi, but she did not think they could sit out front of the shops that had closed for the night. And the ones that were still open would only want customers sitting there.

“The transport district has a lot of rest benches.”

That was exactly what they found in the stern transport district that connected Takao to Musashino.

Musashino’s repair materials were still being transported, so all of the lights were still on.

This atmosphere isn’t exactly conducive to asking for advice, she thought as they found an empty seat overlooking Musashi’s cliff-like outer edge.

They had a nice view from there.

They could see Odawara Castle and the city diagonally below. The city had few lights and they were mostly along the southern coast, so the residents were probably being evacuated.

What a nice place, thought Narumi.

He apparently knew a lot of the people in this transport district. That was likely because he would work transport jobs part-time. People would occasionally call out to and greet him while Narumi placed the bento box on her lap.

...Oh, this crab with cheese is seasoned with olives, isn't it?

It was fatty and oily, which did not seem very healthy, but it provided a nice accent when eating something else.

The soy sauce fried turkey was also quite good, but she decided that was enough fatty foods.

"This egg and bean rice is pretty good."

"Because you end up wanting a staple food."

"Yes," she agreed while scooting the bento box so it sat on both their laps. She was on the left and he was on the right. His right arm was in the way, so he placed it behind the bench and skillfully used his left hand to grab things with his chopsticks.

"We're going to finish this off before we get home," he said.

"We can always head back to the Blue Thunder," she replied.

Then she expressed her thoughts on her current situation.

"This has become a lot of trouble."

I'm no good at talking about myself, thought Narumi.

So she talked about the surrounding situation instead of herself.

"It's so much trouble."

"Because you are the only member of the Date clan here and you must fight against Musashi on Hashiba's side?"

"You figured that out quick."

"I sort of understand you."

"I see you've learned how to be noncommittal."

"Please, enough praise."

She thought about that for about 3 seconds. And then she brought a hand of understanding to her forehead.

“Oh, my bad. Sorry for praising you.”

“As long as you understand. But, Narumi. ...This is part of what it means to leave your clan, so you should help them out when you can. Isn't there anything you can do? Other than money. We're running short on that since I already ordered a porn game this month.”

“I'm aware. We share the address you use to order them, after all. ...And just to be clear, I don't have that kind of secondary armor.”

“I see...”

That was apparently a disappointment, but she was not about to keep that thread of conversation going.

She reached her chopsticks toward the asparagus in sweet soy sauce as she continued on.

“You can prepare yourself for anything, but you still end up complaining, huh?”

“Did you want Western food?”

“Yes, but that's not what I meant.”

Narumi sighed and grabbed some boiled fish with tomato sauce.

“I don't like how often I have to fight my own people.”

“Yes, you did fight the Seiryu back in Date, didn't you? Without any underwear on.”

“How I was dressed is irrelevant. It's the situation that matters.”

I'm hopeless, thought Narumi. He's trying to be nice, but I just snapped back at him.

“Can I have these?”

“You can have two.”

He readily took three, so she glared at him.

But he did not seem to care as he spoke.

“Our class is always cannibalistic, so you don't need to worry about it.”

“Someone could die in a duel between national representatives.”

“Oh, that’s not a big deal.”

Before she could ask how, the half-dragon calmly continued.

“We’re the kind of people who use a god of war to hit someone with a wrench during a special student general assembly.”

“You never hold back, do you?”

“Indeed. We’ve learned to live entirely in the moment. She even cursed upon seeing she had not crushed her opponent to death.”

“And what were you doing then?”

“A bit before that, I had had some fun making dust explosions. Dust explosions are great. They really clean out your windpipe.”

“What a wonderful academy.”

“You only just now figured that out?”

“Judge,” she nodded.

“So what is wrong with fighting your own people?”

“It’s exhausting.”

“Why?”

“Because you understand what harming them would mean. They’re part of the same community, so I end up thinking I’ve harmed someone who was a crucial part of holding that community together.”

“Then could you hit me?”

“I could hit you.”

“Then that is good enough.”

She did not know what he meant, so she asked a question of her own.

“Could you hit me?”

“I could.”

“Seriously? Even though I could die?”

“You would not die.”

He was confident.

“No matter what I did, you would remove your prosthetic arms and legs and use the centipede to fight back. And if that was not enough...”

“Yes?”

“I would protect you, so do not worry.”

“You would protect me from...yourself? That’s a new one. Do half-dragon brains even work?”

“Worry not. ...None of my training would make my fist unstoppable.”

“Then what if I counterattacked immediately afterwards?”

“You can only stop my fist because you are not the kind of person who would do so.”

“Judge.” She nodded. “So you’re telling me to keep every last one of them alive.”

“Judge. As long as they still live, they can manage somehow. So only think about not losing anyone. And, Narumi?”

“What?”

“I believe that is what you did at Date.”

“Yes,” she said with a nod.

As long as it looked that way, she thought while keeping the thought to herself.

“Tomorrow is looking to be a busy day.”

“Some of us will be busy tonight as well.”

“Judge. Like at the Chancellor’s place.”

Narumi tilted her head toward the Main Blue Thunder which was no longer in view.

“All of a sudden moving in together is a very Musashi way of doing it.”

Asama set down her luggage in that space.

This was the Aoi home. It was the main hall built in the back of the Main Blue Thunder.

It had originally been divided into the rooms for Toori, Kimi, and a guest.

...But Masa removed the guest room's wall and Kimi removed the beds...

That had quickly created a long and spacious room.

His room was partitioned off with a curtain.

The hallway side of the room also used a curtain instead of a wall. The window side and back side had walls while the hallway side and his room's side had curtains.

Those walls and curtains surrounded a main hall of about 12 square meters, but...

"Umm."

Asama was unsure what to do while Horizon laid out the tatami mats on the floor. She used her gravitational control, so she could move them around quite easily and it looked very cute. However...

"Oh, Kimi-sama will use Toori-sama's space there. As a form of inspection."

"Wh-what kind of inspection?"

That question came from Mitotsudaira who had also carried her luggage in and stopped in a daze.

Horizon raised both her palms toward Mitotsudaira.

She then turned her body and hands toward the curtain partitioning off his room.

"Sowahhh!"

Her gravitational control pushed the curtain wall horizontally.

On the other side, they heard something fell over and something like a box rolling, but Horizon ignored it. She nodded twice.

“Yes, yes. That cleared up a bit more space. Please help me shift the tatami mats over.”

“Okay,” agreed Asama as she crouched down next to the tatami mat on which Kimi would sleep. She grabbed the edge, and...

“Um, Mito? You want to be close to Toori-kun, right? Since you’re his knight?”

“N-no, Kimi is there. ...And, Horizon, are you sure you don’t want Kimi’s spot?”

“Judge, I think I should sleep in the former guest room for the time being.” She used her gravitational control to push the furthest-back tatami mat against the wall. “I will not slurrrrrrrrrrrp up my old self’s memories, but if there are any regrets there, they should be able to resolve themselves if I am there.”

Asama could not see anything in what had been the guest room. Her prosthetic eye Konoha could not detect anything either. But if that would put Horizon’s mind at ease...

...Horizon must see this like a memorial service.

Even with an automaton body, certain actions could be seen as a resolution of old regrets.

She suddenly turned back toward the other two.

“Where are Toori-sama and Kimi-sama?”

“Eh?” said Mitotsudaira. “Um, since we’re moving in today and my parents are visiting, they took my parents to the Blue Thunder to buy some supplies for a party.”

“Judge. That is perfect then. I would like to discuss something important.”

Namely...

“Toori-sama.”

...Toori-kun?

Asama tensed up at the direction of the conversation and the mention of that name.

For one thing, it was rare for Horizon to ask for advice concerning him.

...Umm.

Asama set her luggage down by the window and hesitated a moment before sitting in front of Horizon. Mitotsudaira also approached and sat next to her.

Horizon looked to both of them and opened her mouth.

“I have determined Kimi-sama understood what was going on and removed Toori-sama from the house for our sake. So I would like to ask something.”

“Wh-what is it?” asked Mitotsudaira.

“Judge. First I would like to confirm something. ...The two of you have come here because of your relationship with Toori-sama and your important positions in relation to him, correct?”

Asama appreciated that the knight next to her did not hesitate to say “judge”.

The most Asama could manage was a nod, and it was so minute that no one could see the movement. But the wolf next to her placed a hand on her chest and spoke plainly.



"I would also like to confirm something with you, Horizon. ...If we are here because of our relationship with my king, it will mean that relationship will only grow deeper. What are your thoughts on that?"

"Are you talking about *eros*?"

The wolf gasped and looked over, but Asama was already looking the other way.

"Tomo...? It's too late to run away now."

"No, um, well, yes."

She's learned how to handle how bad I am at giving up... she thought, but then Horizon nodded.

"Well, that is a natural topic of discussion here. And if you ask me..."

"Y-yes?"

Asama could not help but lean forward and ask. So Horizon...

"Judge. To be blunt, that is difficult for me to answer since I have yet to retrieve all of my emotions. But with the main three and Olos Phtonos..." Horizon nodded. "I am fairly indifferent about it."

"W-wait, you need to give this more thought, Horizon!"

Part of Asama thought it would be better not to stop her, but she stopped her anyway.

She wanted to avoid anything that could be seen as not playing fair. So she took a breath, and...

"Um, you still haven't retrieved your emotions, so you shouldn't be able to properly grasp your feelings on us deepening our relationship with him or about yourself. I mean, your jealousy hasn't actually activated, and, um..."

This was hard to say, but hesitating would not make it any easier.

"You don't have lust, so isn't it difficult for you to make any decisions about the deeper parts of love and that sort of thing?"

She asked. And...

“...”

Horizon averted her gaze a bit and fell silent.

...Eh?

Horizon started sweating, so Asama began wondering if she had made a mistake.

...Wh-what is this about?

“Um, Mito?”

She looked to the side and found Mitotsudaira also averting her gaze and sweating.

Not good. This is very bad, thought Asama as she started to panic.

“Um, you two? Did I say anything weird?”

“No, Asama-sama, but can I ask something?”

Still sweating, Horizon held up a hand.

“Now, Asama-sama. You said I would have difficulty making decisions about love since I do not have lust.”

“Yes, what about it?”

She received a prompt response.

“Are sexual acts how you define love?”

Mitotsudaira watched the flustered shrine maiden next to her.

“Wh-what are you talking about!? Th-that isn’t it at all. N-not at allllll. B-besides, um...right! It is because you love someone that you have sex with them! You don’t love them because of the sex! You have the order wrong there! Right, Mito!?”

“If you say so, Tomo...”

“Over here! Let’s focus over here! You’re looking at me, Mito, but your mind is focused elsewhere, isn’t it!?”

What else was she supposed to do?

But Horizon opened her mouth in front of panicking Asama.

“I apologize, Asama-sama. You have made a slight misunderstanding.”

Which was...

“First of all, the emotions that return to me are generally negative ones. They are deadly sins, so my emotions work to suppress them. Of course, that increases the actions available to me and allows me to make more decisions, but that is not because I am gaining positive emotions. Toori-sama told me in England that those are developed as an opposite reaction. Thus, I do not fear the negative emotions.”

“Then, Horizon, how do you view my king?”

“I confirmed at Mikawa and again at Sanada that he is my opposite. Of course...”

Horizon looked around the room to ensure no one else was there.

“Just like Toori-sama said at England, if I were to lose him, I am sure I would compose my feelings and eventually begin a new life for myself.”

But...

“I have determined I would gain the major bond of remorse before I reached that point.”

“—————”

Mitotsudaira could sense Asama’s tension through her skin.

The shrine maiden was practically giving off an electrical aura.

She must have imagined the scenario Horizon had described. Just like Mitotsudaira had.

“I have determined that would be a lot of trouble,” said Horizon. “Even if you are prepared for it to occur at any time, simply imagining loss can still bring sorrow. Even if you know you will eventually find a replacement, something even better, or a different set of values altogether, wallowing in your memories is always an option, which makes it very difficult.”

Then she looked to Asama and Mitotsudaira.

“You two are the same as me, aren’t you?”

Mitotsudaira noticed a change in Horizon’s expression. Or she thought she did.

She did not see it clearly, but she saw something on the automaton princess’s face.

...Relief?

It looked like she smiled and relaxed her shoulders just a bit. However...

“————”

When Mitotsudaira looked again, Horizon had returned to her usual lack of expression.

“Hm? Is something the matter, Mitotsudaira-sama?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

Had she only imagined it? Either way, Horizon expressionlessly opened her mouth.

“I must correct another misunderstanding Asama-sama made. Olos Phtonos has already activated.”

“...Eh?”

“Judge. Olos Phtonos is the control OS for the Logismoï Oplo. The Logismoï Oplo are made from my emotions, but I believe it is Olos Phtonos that processes them as weapons rather than emotions when they return to me. ...I do not know what will happen when I have gathered them all, but if we include Olos Phtonos itself, my jealousy is functioning at 4/9 capacity.”

Horizon looked to Mitotsudaira and Asama again.

“I sometimes feel jealous of you two or the others. And that is why I said you are welcome to join us,” she said. “Now, time for the main topic at hand: Toori-sama.”

She nodded before continuing.

“To be blunt, Toori-sama will not last.”

“He won’t last...?”

Asama felt like parroting Horizon’s words was meaningless.

...Pretty much.

That was her more honest response to Horizon’s words.

He would not last like this. She did not know if he would be lost or broken, but...

...He will no longer be with us.

Horizon explained why since Mitotsudaira was holding her breath.

“He is gathering the Logismo Oplo and stopping the Apocalypse to retrieve my emotions. That sounds simple enough, but those tasks entail much more than that. Sometimes it goes well and sometimes it does not. Sometimes we lose things like we did before and we learned a lot about how to view that while in Sanada. But...”

But...

“Toori-sama is constantly trying to look good in front of me.”

Asama knew she should probably smile bitterly at this.

But she knew exactly what Horizon meant.

There was one thing he said a lot when speaking to Horizon.

“ ‘I won’t lose’, right?”

What was he trying to defeat? Horizon’s personality? No, Asama had a feeling he could never defeat that. But that aside...

“He’s probably talking about the world domination and everything else he sees through you, Horizon.”

That was it.

He would conquer the world and retrieve all of her emotions, but...

...He really is an idiot...

He was always trying to look good so he would not worry Horizon.

He never let his weakness show, he showed off his strength, and he always kept his darker parts hidden.

Of course...

“Um, Horizon? That’s partially because Toori-kun will die if he feels sad thanks to the contract he accepted on the way to save you at Mikawa...”

But anyone who knew him would know it was more than that. So...

“That was necessary to save you. So, while I’m not about to apologize for it, that was brought about by our decisions and the circumstances, not by your decisions.”

“I am glad to hear you say that, Asama-sama. But we do have a consensus on the fact that Toori-sama’s options are limited.”

Asama agreed with that.

Mitotsudaira seemed to as well:

“My king always acts the king around me...”

“But he can seek help from you, Mitotsudaira-sama.”

Asama realized what Horizon was saying.

...Ah.

She finally understood what he had meant when she arrived here in the afternoon.

“Toori-kun doesn’t try to look good in front of us...”

That’s true, agreed Mitotsudaira.

...Tomo is exactly right.

Neither option could be unconditionally declared good or bad.

“It seems you two already understand,” said Horizon.

Mitotsudaira and Asama nodded.

“That is how a knight’s relationship with her king works.”

“We’ve, well, always been like that...”

But Mitotsudaira understood something else too.

“You avoided bringing this up when my mother or my king were around, didn’t you?”

Even inside the study camp tent, some of it had been set aside as an issue “for later”. As for why...

“Even if he is an idiot, I saw no reason to put it to words and inform Mitotsudaira-sama’s mother of a weakness of his. Of course, there is a good chance she has already noticed, but I thought everyone could help compensate for his idiotic attempts to act tough.”

“You mean...?”

“Judge.” Horizon nodded. “I have determined he will have even more reason to act tough from here on. And I assume you will agree with me there.”

“Judge. ...In the process of conquering the world, we will be more focused on results than on working out plans and policies.”

“Exactly. ...A lot has already happened – much of it silly – and I have been pivotal in finding a solution on several occas-...what is that look for?”

“Oh, nothing,” said Mitotsudaira while she and the shrine maiden waved their hands dismissively.

Horizon slapped her knee.

“Listen. This is a serious topic.”

“...Sorry.”

“From here on, a great many nations will expect something from Toori-sama. A lot will be consumed in the process and he will be held responsible. ...But if I am the only one by his side, he will not last. Because he will be forced to constantly act tough no matter what happens. He will have to constantly put on

a brave face so as not to worry me...and keep me from losing anything. Of course, he can reduce that burden by delegating a lot of the tasks to everyone else, but carrying everyone's impossibilities is how he rules as a king. But outside of that, as we gain more relationships and more is expected of him, people will expect more of the possible from him and not just the impossible," she said. "It really is a lot of trouble. Looking at his results as a politician, simply using the three-nations meeting to recover from the terrible loss at Mikatagahara was more than enough already."

"But there's still so much to go: Hashiba, Nobunaga, Westphalia...and the Apocalypse."

"Judge. ...If only my relationship with him was simpler. But, well, how should I put this?"

Horizon glanced up at the ceiling.

After just a few seconds she lowered her gaze to them.

"...That isn't going to happen given my personality."

"N-nothing is ever going to change if you just accept that, you know?" said Asama.

"No, no."

Horizon held out both hands to stop her.

Then she raised her right index finger on the right side of her head.

"I am his driving force, but if he acts tough and continues ever onward, he will eventually wear out. So..."

"You want to use our relationships with him to help him recover and build up his endurance?" asked Asama.

But she hesitated for a few beats after saying it.

Finally, she continued.

"Our relationships are not tools for propping up your relationship with Toorikun."

That wasn't the best way of putting that, thought Asama with a mental slump of her shoulders.

But even after everything that had happened, she did have her pride.

This was her relationship with someone she cared for, so it would feel like an insult if it was used as a tool or treated as inferior.

Of course, that was an issue of her feelings and could change based on her interpretation of the situation. But...

"If I feel insulted, I will leave immediately."

"Asama-sama, while we can judge the value of relationships, they cannot be ranked as superior or inferior. And...that is where the acting tough comes from." Horizon looked straight at her. "Toori-sama is a terrible entertainer. You should know that better than anyone. I have heard about Suzu-sama's essay you read at Mikawa." She narrowed her eyes. "But when that terrible entertainer is with someone and he thinks it is an important moment for them, he will grow serious for that person and that person alone. He has a bad habit of only seeing that person at such a time. That is why the rulers of other nations hear him saying such silly things. Asama-sama, you have to have seen that up close countless times. ...This time, you and Mitotsudaira-sama will be that someone."

"So...?"

"Judge." Horizon nodded. "I am already that someone. But I am his driving force and I must have him act tough, even if I know it is a burden on him. Because he wants to look good in front of me and I am not crass enough to stop him. ...So I want the two of you to give him a time for indulgence. When he is exhausted, angry, or approaching sadness, please help him and allow him to indulge. Because in a way, you could say that is his true self."

"And in those cases, you'll send him to us while telling him to stop acting tough and get some rest?"

"Judge. ...Something that you can both think of as 'nice' might be for the best. In that way, I have determined Mitotsudaira-sama may have the best position since he can try to look good for her as a king while also revealing his pathetic

side by seeking help.”

“M-me!?”

The knight grew flustered and Asama nodded.

“My, Mitooooo, aren’t you lucky?”

“Wh-what is that mocking tone for!?”

“Although knowing you, you’ll be more licky than lucky. Yes.”

A blush instantly covered the knight’s face.

And she spread her mouth horizontally.

“Um, Horizon? What if our relationship develops to the point of, um...*that* happening?”

“Judge. I am the top batter, so I imagine Toori-sama would be more accepting if I was the first at bat.”

“Do we have to discuss this touchy topic like we’re managing a baseball team?”

But Asama had heard what mattered.

...It is true that Toori-kun tries to look good in front of Horizon...

It was probably important that she felt a little envious of that.

He did not try to look good in front of her, but that itself was a privilege of hers.

...I see.

“Horizon, this is about the directions in the battle formation you were talking about, isn’t it?” Asama finally felt her shoulders relaxing. “We describe it all with the single major word ‘relationship’, but we all have our small relationships that combine into a single large relationship.”

That was true of a family, of an organism, and of an organization.

...Oh, and the relationships between the Shinto gods are like that too...

Her job made it impossible not to think of that example.

But Horizon suddenly moved her face in close.

“Listen, you two.”

Asama knew what Horizon was going to say next, so she said it herself.

And Mitotsudaira happened to say it at the same time.

“This is our shared secret. ...Right?”

After asking, Asama felt like Horizon had smiled a little.

And she had to wonder how many more times something like this was going to happen.

“That’s 17 times.”

Katagiri heard Hachisuka’s announcement and another sound: a splash.

...*Wow*.

He had swum in this pool the other day, but it now had a duckboard laid over the surface, creating a simple water-top stage.

The duckboard sank down a bit, so the people on it had their toes sinking into the water.

But one of those people was not standing in the water at the moment.

That person was Fukushima.

She had fallen over and been soaked with the splash she had created.

The other person on the water had remained standing throughout.

“Kiyomasa-san...”

She was facing away from Katagiri, so he could see her blonde hair dry and blowing in the wind.

She had yet to make an obvious swing of Caledfwlch. And yet...

“Why can’t Fukushima-san stand up to her at all?”

“Are you asking me?” Hachisuka crossed her arms and tilted her head. “I don’t know what Kiyomasa is doing, but she’s definitely keeping Fukushima from

doing much of anything.”

“So it’s affecting the start of her techniques?”

“Look into it yourself.”

That told Katagiri that his fears were grounded in reality.

...Hachisuka-san is surprisingly nice.

She was probably trying to be strict, but it actually made her easy to read.

She was probably aware of it, but she likely thought going further would be too much work and she must not have seen a need to make herself any more of a villain.

Katagiri knew she was watching the other two train as her way of showing concern.

...Yes, Hachisuka-san is a good person.

After all, she would not barge in while he was taking a bath. Nor did she half-jokingly and casually use some kind of *lernen figur* to record and examine him.

Of course, he had no interest in seeing an elementary school girl’s body.

Besides, thought Katagiri. I have Musashi’s lewd shrine maiden.

“Katagiri, keep your eyes on the pool.”

“Oh, s-sorry!”

What did it mean if he was being scolded by an elementary school kid?

But he heard the same sound again.

Fukushima had attempted an attack on Kiyomasa and had been sent flying.

“18 times. If she doesn’t catch on soon, then she has it really bad.”

Chapter 40: Stalemated Top Runner

第四十章

『行き詰まりのトップランナー』



間違えた道を
なかなか戻れないのは
戻る行為が後ろ向きだからだろうか
配点（振り返り）

Is it so hard to head back

After taking a wrong turn

Because heading back means turning around?

Point Allocation (Looking Back)

Below the night sky, the festival lights lit the pool from below.

Katagiri asked Hachisuka a question while watching the spray rising and Fukushima rolling along the duckboard.

“What do you mean she has it really bad?”

“Did you think this was a slump?”

“It isn’t?”

Hachisuka did not respond and that in itself was an answer to his question.

...If this isn’t a slump, then what is it?

Even Katagiri could tell Fukushima had lost her luster. Her combat results had been missing something since Novgorod. Today, for example, she had failed to stop Sanada’s Miyoshi Seikai and she had been driven away.

What would happen if she was still like this during the attack on Paris tomorrow?

Katagiri had thought he knew the purpose of the training Kiyomasa was leading here.

...It’s to remove that “cloud” from above Fukushima-san’s head...

However...

“If this isn’t meant to get her out of a slump, then what are they trying to accomplish here?”

“You don’t know?” Hachisuka sighed with her arms still crossed. “It’s absurd. ...Just how much does Kiyomasa trust Fukushima?”

“What do you-...?”

“I won’t tell you until we’ve seen the result. There’s no point in getting your hopes up prematurely.”

There was another splash.

Fukushima fell next to Kiyomasa and water splashed behind her.

But what happened next was somewhat different.

Fukushima hopped up from her fallen position.

On the first roll after falling, she thrust her hands against the duckboard to launch her body up.

She was in midair with her chest pointed down. She landed feet-first with Ichinotani in her right hand.

She moved forward to target Kiyomasa’s back.

Kiyomasa, however, did not look back.

And Fukushima continued forward to strike Kiyomasa on the left side of her back.

She charged.

Fukushima saw the sky.

It was the night sky.

...Huh?

That was strange. She had attacked Kiyomasa from behind. And yet...

...Why?

Just then, she realized something.

She realized an obvious fact about these repeated results.

But...

“———”

She felt something like a dark and harsh shove.

And she produced a 20th splash.

Kiyomasa saw Fukushima rolling to her left.

The other girl was now about 7 meters in front of her.

There was a large splash, but the shallow waves were stronger. That would be because she had been collapsed on her side and bounced along the duckboard.

The girl was breathing heavily while lying collapsed on the duckboard.

The end of her long ponytail had fallen through the gaps in the duckboard.

...But.

Did she notice it? wondered Kiyomasa.

Fukushima's movement had been different from before. Before, she had been attacking from the front as a form of "training", but attacking from behind like this meant something else entirely. Even as a form of training, that attack had been in preparation for a real battle and not just to learn some technique.

However...

"You still did not notice your failure when you made your attack, Fukushima-sama. So I hope you noticed it after your attack..."

"Testament ...I more or less understand it now."

Kiyomasa heard Fukushima's voice.

She rose from the water as if crawling and then stood up.

Her wet black hair looked skinnier and Kiyomasa felt apologetic. But...

...I would be spoiling her if I didn't let her figure it out on her own.

She lacked the strength needed to help her opponent realize how dangerous her mistake was. Especially with Fukushima who was even more skilled than her.

That was why Kiyomasa decided to handle this with speed and accuracy. At the moment, she asked a question.

"So what will you do?"

"Testament. I will be fine."

Fukushima stood with water dripping from her and with Ichinotani in her right hand.

“Thou are saying my actions have become too patterned, aren’t thou?”

It’s a simple matter, thought Katagiri.

Doing anything required an action and actions began with a movement which continued on to completion.

Mastering an action meant to find the most accurate and optimal flow of movement.

But Fukushima had honed herself too far.

“Her flow of movement has become too fixed...”

Safety was a top priority on the battlefield. Mistakes could mean death, so to avoid pushing herself unnecessarily, she had focused on her own *katas*.

But what happened when someone knew what those were?

Then the optimal *kata* would become a pitfall to failure.

“Do you see why it was important to reproduce what happened today?”

Hachisuka asked that while viewing the feet of the two girls in the pool.

“The splashing.”

“...Huh?”

“Just watch and learn.”

Fukushima lowered her body as if to agree with Hachisuka.

She was preparing to move forward, toward Kiyomasa’s right side.

She held Ichinotani out front on her right to prevent Kiyomasa from using Caledfwlch in her right hand. Fukushima held the weapon with her left hand at the blade end of the shaft and her right hand on the shaft’s butt.

Her left hand controlled Ichinotani’s tip, guiding it toward Caledfwlch.

If Kiyomasa attempted to swing Caledfwlch forward, she would use Ichinotani

to interfere.

But that was not her attack.

A moment later, Katagiri realized what Fukushima was doing.

She used her right hand to swing the butt end toward Kiyomasa.

It only took an instant.

The left-hand tip was a feint meant to disguise the right-hand attack and it also supplied the initial movement for swinging the butt.

The motion swung the butt and shaft horizontally.

However...

“A horizontal swing of a straight line is difficult to dodge. ...You can tell she really wants to hit Kiyomasa after failing so many times already.”

But what happened next was strange.

It happened just as the horizontally-swung butt was about to reach Kiyomasa.

“...Eh?”

All of a sudden, Katagiri saw Fukushima rise up and pitch forward.

...*Why?*

He did not know, but Hundred Crest Land Survey was still recording.

Fukushima bent her body and tried to endure.

“...!?”

But she was blown away.

The duckboard had soaked up the water and sunk a bit.

Fukushima landed on her right shoulder and rolled along it.

She asked a question while the water sprayed up and her body caught on the water, making her bounce.

...*Why!?*

It was not that she was underestimating Kiyomasa's skill.

But this was strange.

That action had been a rare one for her.

Ichinotani could block and absorb an enemy's attack, so she generally used the tip for both attack and defense. She never made a horizontal swing of the butt.

She had never even demonstrated that movement during training.

So how had Kiyomasa seen through it?

...What is...

She could not finish the question in her mind.

A silver flash had reached her collapsed vision.

It was Caledfwlch.

"Looks like I can start moving now."

With that, Kiyomasa attacked with her large spear that also looked like a sword.

Kiyomasa saw Fukushima take evasive action.

...She's sharp.

Not her reaction. Her movement.

Her ponytail hopped up as she jumped backwards while doubled over.

She had chosen not to stand up because she was fearful of a further attack and was thinking of a counterattack. By leaning forward, she reduced the area open to attack and made the first step of her next action in advance.

It was a good movement. But...

"Now, then."

Kiyomasa pursued. She closed the gap between her and Fukushima's movement.

That evasive jump after falling created a distance of two steps, but Kiyomasa put on airs and forcibly covered it in a single step.

She caught up. And...

“What will you do?”

As soon as she asked that, Ichinotani’s tip arrived as a counterattack.

It was perfectly timed for when Kiyomasa completed her forced step.

There was no room for criticism in the movement, power, or idea.

...Well done.

With that thought, Kiyomasa took action.

Katagiri saw Fukushima fly through the air.

She had been facing Kiyomasa, but she flew backwards in the opposite direction.

She was thrown into the water in something of a side flip, but Katagiri did not initially understand what had happened.

...What was that!?

Fukushima had just launched a counterattack to the front.

So why had she been sent backwards?

Something had been done to match her counterattack.

“What was she hit with?”

When Katagiri asked Yokosuka, that girl next to him watched the pool as she answered.

“...It’s nothing like that.”

Hachisuka scratched her head.

“She really does have it bad.”

“Have what?”

“She’s gonna need to be broken down a fair bit.”

Meanwhile, Kiyomasa was moving. She slowly walked forward and toward Fukushima.

But not to pursue. She was approaching her opponent. That was all.

Some water splashed up at Kiyomasa's feet, but the gap between her and Fukushima closed.

“————”

With a single splash, Fukushima made a jump.

Fukushima took a position that allowed her to confront Kiyomasa.

She was to Kiyomasa's right, so Caledfwlch would block her from view.

She was about 5 meters away. Ichinotani's reach was just under 3 meters, so she would be in attack range after only a short approach.

But she did not simply charge in.

Kiyomasa knew how to use her Caledfwlch. She would be constantly on the lookout for someone taking this position and she would have trained in how to respond.

And Fukushima had chosen to jump there.

That was a feint against Kiyomasa. Kiyomasa would have to question whether she should attack there or not.

And that spot allowed Fukushima to jump behind her.

“————”

She did so.

It was a low jump and she landed in an instant. The duckboard was below the water's surface, so she did not slip when she landed behind Kiyomasa with her knees bent and ready to spring.

She could make an attack, so she stuck her right knee out toward Kiyomasa and balanced her body.

She would send her knee out and then her spear. And Fukushima realized

something after taking that stance and moving.

At some point, she had ended up in front of Kiyomasa.

...Huh?

This was strange.

Why was she in front of her after circling behind her?

She had not jumped or circled around to that spot.

So Kiyomasa must have turned to face her.

She had done so in an instant.

...She predicted this?

That had to be the case and Fukushima understood how she had predicted it.

That flow of movement was one Kiyomasa had often experienced in training.

But, thought Fukushima. *How did she also predict that I would move behind her?*

That was strange.

She had moved behind Caledfwlch countless times in training. At Kiyomasa's request, she had thought up ways to attack her and discussed possible countermeasures.

But moving behind her afterwards was just one of many options.

How had she predicted that choice?

"..."

Kiyomasa moved toward her.

This is not good, thought Fukushima.

She found herself in an inexplicable situation. She could not explain how her actions had been so perfectly predicted.

However, she also did not understand why it was inexplicable, so she could not come up with any kind of countermeasure.

At this rate, Kiyomasa would attack her and she would lose.

No, she had already lost several times. The number of losses had just passed 20.

There was only one possibility:

...My actions are being seen and predicted.

Fukushima had a sudden thought: *Is that the trick?*

For now, I will assume that my actions are being seen, thought Fukushima.

...In that case, my actions are being predicted because they are being seen.

And with that...

“ ... ”

She realized something.

She realized how her actions were being seen.

...Ah.

Katagiri realized that Fukushima's movement had changed.

When she stood up and moved away from Kiyomasa's approach, the way she walked had changed.

Before, she had been in a hurry to approach and attack her opponent, so she had leaned forward like she was running. She had leaned forward and raised her hips in a stance that allowed her to kick her legs backwards.

But that had changed.

She was more upright and her legs were arranged side to side instead of front to back. She also kept her hips low.

Katagiri thought it made her look like a crab.

But this crab moved quickly.

She did not run along the water like before.

She did not jump toward her destination.

She first sent one or the other of her legs forward.

She sent out a knee and then placed her toes on the duckboard at her destination. Then her body caught up with her leg.

Instead of kicking herself forward, she pulled herself forward.

It was a lot like crawling or climbing with just one's arms.

...Is that...?

"One of our predecessors, who have since joined Sanada, moved a lot like that," said Hachisuka. "You can use your leg and knee as a deterrent and you can also immediately pull it back. It makes quick direction changes difficult, but Fukushima can overcome that with her mobility."

I see, thought Katagiri before opening his mouth.

He had realized something about the way Fukushima placed her toes on the water's surface.

"She didn't make a splash."

And...

"Kiyomasa-san will have a hard time seeing Fukushima-san's back leg. That means she can't read Fukushima-san's movements."

"Why is that?"

"There are no more splashes to reveal her footsteps and the movement of her leg is hidden."

"Yes." Hachisuka sounded unimpressed. "She's reached the point that she needs to follow a silly plan when moving around."

Fukushima moved forward.

But she did not simply advance. She circled around to Kiyomasa's left side.

She was turned so her right side faced forward. She stuck out her right leg and pulled her body in with her right knee.

She turned using the left leg behind her.

He left leg was up on its toes and it turned her body as a rear rudder.

She predicted the best time to move forward and back as she continued on.

...This is it...!

Her left leg was hidden by her right knee and her body.

She held Ichinotani in front of her body as if showing it off to Kiyomasa.

It was difficult to use a spear in that position.

When holding a spear in both arms, her own body and the shaft would be in the way.

When holding a spear in front of you, you generally held it so it extended to the side But then she could not thrust the spear to the front.

That was a poor position for circling to Kiyomasa's left side.

Kiyomasa stood directly across from her as she prepared her spear.

She had to think about her own body's interference when swinging the spear.

And she needed to push it forward, not to pull it back to gather strength.

This was not an easy situation for controlling the spear. But...

“————”

That is fine, concluded Fukushima. She had never before done anything so reckless while training with Kiyomasa.

...Now she won't be able to "predict" my action.

With that, she charged forward and launched an attack while passing by Kiyomasa.

“...!?”

She was filled with instantaneous confusion. Kiyomasa had raised her left hand while Fukushima charged in with Ichinotani.

She had reacted.

Fukushima had a thought in that moment.

...How...!?

The angle and movement of Kiyomasa's raised left hand told Fukushima what she was trying to do.

She was trying to grab the tip of Ichinotani.

The rectangular tip meant it could be grabbed as long as you did not grab the blade.

So Kiyomasa was trying to do just that. She was going to calmly grab Fukushima's weapon, and...

...Knock me to the ground!?

It was the same as before.

Throughout all of this, Kiyomasa had not made a single attack.

She would predict Fukushima's actions and send her flying in some way or another: sweep her legs out from under her, pull down on the arm swinging the weapon, or place a hand on her waist and spin her.

That counterattack should not have happened.

When Fukushima had charged forward, Kiyomasa had swept her feet out from under her and rotated her sideways through the air.

It had only taken an instant.

Fukushima had been placed on top of her swinging leg and forced into a flip. There had been no hesitation in the action and it had not eliminated any of Fukushima's momentum.

“————”

This was the same.

Just like before, she would be sent flying.

The spear tip would be grabbed and pulled back and that was sure to send her forward.

That was devastating with her legs separated to the front and back. She could

not endure a pull to the side and down.

Imagining her imminent loss, Fukushima tried to pull back.

But it was too late. She had already passed the point of no return for that future. So...

...Kh.

Even after more than 20 losses, she could not figure out why she was losing.

She had thought it was because Kiyomasa knew her movements from training, but that was not it.

She had thought it was because the splashes were allowing Kiyomasa to predict her actions, but that was not it.

Then what was it?

Why was she losing here?

...I need to think...!

She had no time.

There were only two things she could do: think and move as a reflexive response to that.

So she did so.

Well done, thought Kiyomasa.

She saw a certain action in front of her.

As she tried to grab Ichinotani's tip, it suddenly opened up.

The rectangular spear tip split to either side from the base to take a dragonfly shape.

Fukushima had opened the blade so it could not be grabbed.

The blade moved back and opened so Kiyomasa could not grab it, but it also seemed to be threatening her.

This is a bluff, thought Kiyomasa.

But her eyes felt her opponent's actions.

She did not see them. There was not enough time to see and understand.

So she felt the movements entering her vision and predicted them.

Fukushima was not there.

More accurately, only her fluttering hair was there.

The wet ponytail was circling behind her.

Fukushima moved quickly.

The speed came from letting go of Ichinotani, but this was not movement of her legs. There was only one way she could cover that distance in an instant with her legs spread front to back like that.

“Headfirst Fall.”

Fukushima whipped up the wind.

The wind circled behind Kiyomasa.

...Wonderful.

Fukushima swiftly shifted between one action and another in the middle of battle.

She likely had not noticed it herself, but how many people in the current Far East could think up and pull off that kind of thing?

In battle, this girl could produce and respond to any movement she could think of.

And due to a certain factor, she no longer recognized that ability of hers.

Kiyomasa had to correct that.

She had to do so in every way she could.

“Yes.”

After reminding herself of that, Kiyomasa breathed in.

...Now, then.

She had to make sure Fukushima realized why she could predict and respond

to Fukushima's actions.

...Are you coming?

Fukushima's wind danced behind her.

She was coming.

Fukushima leaped.

When she landed from the leap behind Kiyomasa, she kicked strongly at the water.

That would tell the other girl exactly where she was.

She made the duckboard creak to draw attention to her location.

And then she took another leap.

But not to the front: up above.

She had to launch herself above Kiyomasa's head. That was the only option. Any horizontal movement could be "predicted".

And a simple leap above the other girl would also be "predicted".

So she had created a foothold by splashing the water upon landing.

Headfirst Fall could provide acceleration based on any foothold.

She only had to step on the scattered drops of water.

She could use "ideal movements" for that. For that technique, she controlled her body and moved it exactly as she wanted. She could do that to step on the water and use it as footholds.

Of course, she had lost at Novgorod despite possessing this technique.

She had lost a competition of ideal movements with her enemy. They had been on a similar level then, but...

"———"

No, realized Fukushima.

Her enemy's ideal movements had been superior.

That was all there was to it. And...

...Ah.

I have no weapon, she realized.

Her weapon was there.

When leaping with Headfirst Fall earlier, her wet ponytail had lightly caught on Ichinotani's shaft.

Her hair would pull on the airborne spear and carry it to her hand as she flew over Kiyomasa's head.

So Fukushima did it. She kicked the water and used her falling acceleration to arrive above Kiyomasa's head.

She arrived.

She achieved an unbelievable height and distance in the span of a breath, but her path was more important than her position.

Instead of simply leaping, she took a complex path using the water drop footholds. If anything, she attempted to fall over Kiyomasa's head from the sky in front of her.

Ichinotani reached her outstretched right hand.

It was there.

She grabbed it and pulled it in.

It was Caledfwlch.

Katagiri saw a strange sight.

Fukushima was hit by an attack in midair and slammed into the water.

But that was only the result. It was the process leading up to that which was strange.

...What...?

Kiyomasa had sent Caledfwlch flying through the air to match Fukushima's leap.

At the same time, she had grabbed Fukushima's Ichinotani and dropped it down. She had not let Ichinotani escape after its tip had opened to escape her grasp and then was abandoned.

She eliminated the enemy's weapon. Next, she had tossed Caledfwlch's right blade to Fukushima in the air and circled around above her.

She had used Caledfwlch's thruster to leap above Fukushima in an instant.

From there, she had only needed to make her attack.

But, thought Katagiri.

...What was that?

Kiyomasa had jumped from directly below Fukushima, so Fukushima should have seen it.

But from Katagiri's perspective Fukushima had looked like a clown that could not see what was right in front of her.

"Kiyomasa sure is thorough."

Hachisuka spoke quietly.

"Was it familiarity from training? ————No.

"Was it her footsteps splashing in the water? ————No.

"Then was it simply that she's cleverer than Fukushima? ————No.

"Those are all wrong. But they are all things that amateurs and somewhat skilled people will notice and take advantage of. Against an expert or a monster, they're more than just openings. They lead directly to death."

"Then that wasn't why Kiyomasa-san set this up?"

"No, this wasn't some fancy stage meant to point out the splashing or the training. ...It was to point out that it isn't any of those."

Meaning...

"It was to show Fukushima that her failure is something more fundamental."

...Why...!?

Fukushima questioned everything while kneeling on the duckboard.

Why was she losing?

It was not just Kiyomasa's familiarity with her training and it was not just that her movements were being predicted. Even her clever ideas were being cut off.

What was she supposed to do?

Kiyomasa picked up Caledfwlch's fallen right blade. Water dripped from it as she used just her right hand to connect it to the one she already held.

Then she used her left hand to lightly spin around what she had already collected: Ichinotani.

The blade sliced through the water and reflected the vermillion festival lights, but she did not so much as glance at it.

She simply aimed Caledfwlch's tip at Fukushima.

"Fukushima-sama. ...What do you have to say about this situation?"

Fukushima thought about how to answer that question.

But she already knew the answer.

Ever since Novgorod, she had completely lost her luster. It felt like the thread she used to grasp victory had snapped.

Until then, she had been able to pull off the ideal movements of an expert.

But now she was not even confident she could do that.

No, she felt like her "ideal movements" were different from those of the experts.

They would spin and dance as if they were swimming through the flow of battle, but she was simply moving and finding footholds for acceleration.

She could not trust her own techniques.

She felt pathetic for letting a single defeat do this to her.

But at Novgorod, she suffered...

"Complete and utter defeat."

This was the same. No, this was far worse.

“I cannot win.”

“Testament. Is that so? Then...”

Kiyomasa swung her right hand.

She purposefully drove Caledfwlch through Fukushima’s face.

She’s really smashed her now, thought Hachisuka when she saw the attack.

...Kiyomasa isn’t holding back.

Was that how much she cared for Fukushima, her partner at the top?

But that attack had contained no mercy whatsoever. The snap of her wrist had looked light, but that was what gave it such great speed. And a blade like Caledfwlch would cause injury if it simply hit you.

A direct blow to the face could easily smash the skull.

This was Hashiba’s front line. It was a facility for the up-and-coming elites. The medical technology available on the ship could provide all the necessary emergency care.

It would take time for a full recovery, but her smashed face would heal.

Of course, the wars would be over by then.

That was the meaning held behind the attack Kiyomasa so casually sent Fukushima’s way.

It would do greater harm to her future than her physical body.

And...

“Fukushima-san!”

Shut up, Katagiri. Why are your hands on your cheeks like a girl? Although using me as a baseline, the girly reaction is to keep your arms crossed.

But what happened to Fukushima? wondered Hachisuka.

She looked up and saw something other than fatigue or a lack of motivation.

Their leader was captured by something else.

“...Fear.”

Anxiety also described it.

She was afraid of losing.

If she lost some important battle, her companions would experience something more fearsome than death.

And more importantly...

...We will fail in our objective.

But if she let that fear consume her, it was all over.

“Figure it out,” said Hachisuka.

Her eyes were on Kiyomasa, who had a grim look on her face as she finished swinging Caledfwlch.

She had guts if she could do something *like that* without an *even worse* look on her face.

Fukushima, meanwhile...

“She lost.”

Or she should have.

“Heh.” Hachisuka laughed quietly. “Why can’t you lose, Fukushima?”

Fukushima felt something cold on her right cheek.

What was touching her there? She slowly moved her gaze to the right and saw it.

Her face...her eyes could see it there: Caledfwlch’s blade.

If the thick blade was next to her face and touching her right cheek, then she had not been smashed.

Kiyomasa had missed. Then...

...Was that just a threat?

Had she come within millimeters of hitting her in order to open her eyes?

But her view of herself suddenly distorted.

Caledfwlch was pulled back toward Kiyomasa.

And Kiyomasa spoke.

“Please do not dodge.”

...Huh!?

Fukushima questioned what Kiyomasa had said.

She had not tried to dodge. She had seen the sudden attack and prepared herself for what was to come: *I really am a lost cause if I have made Kiyo-dono go this far.*

So she had resigned herself to taking this attack as a rebuke.

She had not dodged.

...I swear it...

She tried to promise she had not dodged.

But then the blade arrived again. She saw its glint in front of her.

“———”

Yes, she said in her heart.

She had lost and had no hope of recovering, but she had a companion who would end it for her.

So she leaned forward to accept that ending. Still seated, she moved to let the blade hit her as a way of taking responsibility for her friend and companion’s effort.

Katagiri realized something had ended.

Kiyomasa’s second attack sliced through the air.

...She’s serious.

She sent Caledfwlch forth with her wrist, yet it heavily pierced the air.

And along the blade's path...

"Why...?"

He could see Caledfwlch's blade.

It was next to Fukushima's face. It had seemed to graze her left cheek and passed behind her shoulder.

It had not hit her.

Katagiri commented on the divine weapon's failure.

"Why...is she dodging?"

"Training," said Hachisuka with a quick laugh. "I recognize that movement."

And...

"It's a survival instinct that functions at a subconscious level. That's what's dodging all of these."

"But." Katagiri frowned. "Isn't that what guided her to failure before?"

"Figure it out."

Hachisuka said that to him, but then...

"Ahh."

She must have decided he was the type who could not figure it out.

With a look that could only be disgust in her eyebrows and mouth, she opened her mouth.

He felt extremely apologetic as she explained.

"Balance."

That was all.

Then he saw movement in front of them. Kiyomasa had made her third attack.

It was a deep jab with her elbow behind it.

I dodged it, realized Fukushima.

The first time, she had not even noticed.

The second time, she had been unable to believe it.

The third time, she had understood what she had done.

And the next jab was coming.

“————”

Kiyomasa stepped forward for the fourth one.

...Kh.

Will I move? thought Fukushima about her own body. She had reacted subconsciously to dodge the previous three, but what about when she was conscious of it?

“...”

She dodged it.

It carved across her right cheek and it felt like having a bug crawling along her skin. Her blood vessels were sliced one after another. Blood spilled from where she felt the bug's legs.

But she had dodged it. She had dodged with her own conscious will and her own actions.

But she still had questions.

What good was dodging?

It was not like she would lose her life if she did not dodge.

Was she afraid of the pain?

That was not it. An attack powerful enough to smash her face would also knock her unconscious. In fact, a scrape like this would leave her with more pain than that.

Then had her pride not allowed her to give up here?

That was not it either. She was more afraid of being unable to continue fighting. If she was concerned about the trouble she would cause her

companions...

...Giving up here would be easier for everyone.

So why had she dodged it?

She did not know. But...

“————”

A fifth and sixth attack arrived.

Fukushima dodged the spear tip atop the water.

Her stance had crumbled.

She quickly crawled, rolled, kicked water up at Kiyomasa, and attempted to stand up.

She could not manage it.

Fukushima kicked at the duckboard and her footing collapsed.

She simply produced a splash, fell to her knees, and tried desperately to move away.

...Kh.

If she was hit, it was all over.

And that would make everything so much easier.

She fought on the front line, her position pitted her against the strongest of their enemies, she had inherited the name of Fukushima Masanori, and most importantly...

...I have my destiny and duty as one of the Ten Spears!

My companion will free me from that pressure.

That will be the end of it.

Yes, Kiyo-dono is more suited for the top position than me.

After all, she has managed to overpower me when I am supposed to be at the top.

So I can pass that position to Kiyo-dono and use my defeat as the proof.

That is for the best.

So why?

“————”

She had to have dodged more than 20 attacks already.

Why?

Why did she continue to dodge when none of her attacks could get through and she had given up?

The answer was obvious.

Because if she was defeated here, she would never know why she had dodged earlier.

If she gave up, she would never solve the mystery of that moment.

...*Why?*

Why had she chosen not to sink?

And just as she isolated that question inside herself...

“You leave me no choice.”

Kiyomasa raised Caledfwlch.

Fukushima looked back atop the duckboard and saw a different stance from before.

Kiyomasa held the combined double spear to her side and she spoke.

“Finish this...Caledfwlch.”

Fukushima reflexively took action.

She grabbed the duckboard section floating to the right of the one she was kneeling on.

“...”

She swung her entire body around and used the momentum to throw it at Kiyomasa.

The collection of boards flew up from low in the air. The duckboard section was the size of a tatami mat and it strained under its water-laden weight, but...

“Kh...!”

Instead of throwing it at Kiyomasa, it was more like releasing it as a horizontal, axe-like swing.

Kiyomasa predicted that action.

But the look Fukushima gave her was far more painful than seeing the right arm reaching for the neighboring duckboard section.

She saw Fukushima desperately trying to think up something to do and she felt a sense of self-loathing.

But there was a good reason to push Fukushima this far.

However, her action had been poorly timed.

Caledfwlch was already prepared to fire and dodging the duckboard had shifted its aim.

“...”

She had intended to hit Fukushima with a somewhat horizontal blow.

But now the tip was aimed somewhat downwards.

...Not good...!

The impact tore into the pool.

It crushed and shook the water while smashing the dozen or so duckboard sections in an instant.

“————”

The pool exploded.

The ruptured water was dumped on Katagiri.

Caledfwlch’s attack had not hit Fukushima.

For one thing, it had not released its normal form of attack. The sparring settings had fired an impact instead.

And then Caledfwlch's impact had hit the water at Fukushima's feet.

It had not dug through it.

It had compressed it with an impact.

But after it was pushed down, it had to return to its original shape.

The compression heated the pool water until steam rose from it.

But that was as far as the water lasted.

The compressed water exploded from the center of the attack.

The impact would have diffused in the air, but in the water it functioned properly and reflected back.

The water sent itself scattering through the air and carried the duckboard sections with it. And then...

...Wah!

The impact that had struck the pool was launched upwards.

It was an explosion.

The waves burst and Katagiri saw Kiyomasa leap back as if pushed by the mountain of water.

A moment later, the airborne water fell back down as rain.

The splinters of the duckboard also fell while Katagiri realized Fukushima was nowhere to be seen.

"Fukushima-san...!"

The falling water threatened to drown out his voice.

Next to him, Hachisuka spoke while equally soaked.

"She fell."

She gestured toward the sky to port.

"Let's see how this turns out."

Fukushima thought, *I have seen the sky a lot today.*

In the morning, she had looked up into the sky as Yoshiaki and Wakisaka tied up Kani and flew away.

At midday, she had looked up into the sky from Kiyomasa's lap after her battle with Seikai Nyuudou.

At night, she had looked up into the sky after being blown away by Kiyomasa's Caledfwlch.

It mostly had to do with Kiyo-dono, she thought, but now was not the time.

After all, she had fallen from the ironclad ship.

They were on the 8th ship. Up to the 4th ship were lined up in front of that one.

They were all holding a festival on their decks and building up people's spirits before the attack on Paris tomorrow.

She had fallen from there.

That was a drop of about 50 meters. She would not survive a fall of that height.

But she had no way of saving herself either.

She would normally have spells to counteract a fall, but she was wearing a swimsuit. And she had only installed her training divine protections inside the swimsuit's hard point parts.

She had thought anything extra would cause her to overlook what she was doing wrong.

...Such an incompetent mistake.

She could blame no one but herself if she met her end here.

And a thought occurred to her only now.

...Am I going to meet an early end here?

She must have been a lost cause from the moment she had failed to

understand what she was doing wrong.

She thought she had been fairly strong for this age of warring states, but it had not been enough. Worse, she had lacked the power to even understand what she lacked.

So she had lost to someone who had made a comeback: Honda Futayo.

That girl had been off her game when they first fought, so Fukushima's initial "win" had been a mistake. After seeking a clear result and impatiently demanding a rematch, the true difference in strength had become all too clear.

Fukushima sighed and spoke to herself as she fell through empty air.

"I..."

If possible...

"I wish I could redo those two battles..."

She wanted another direct clash in which her opponent was on her game and she was not impatient.

...If only I could do that...

That was when Fukushima realized something.

...I still have something I have left undone.

Of course she did.

She was stepping down from the stage early, so nothing was complete.

But now a voice escaped her lips.

"Kh..."

How many times had her vision been blurred by tears now?

Even as she realized how weak she had become, she converted her groan into a voice.

"I hate this."

Fukushima was aware she lacked strength.

But the result of that mistaken battle had twisted something inside her.

She had become unable to accept it.

She had not properly learned how much strength she did have. She had experienced an incomplete victory and defeat, but then powerful enemies had appeared before her.

“Yes...”

She was not strong enough.

But it was her own naiveté that had grown distorted

So she would end it here.

She would fall and end it.

And yet...

“Why?”

Why? thought Fukushima.

Why had she not closed her eyes?

Why had she not stopped breathing?

Why had she not given up on herself?

Why?

“Why...!?”

Why was she reaching her hand out into the empty air?

The answer was obvious.

A single straightforward shape was falling toward her.

“Ichinotani...!”

Kiyomasa said nothing.

She simply hurried to the edge of the deck and tossed a spear down.

The spear could not stop the fall.

Ichinotani lacked a fall reduction divine protection.

But, thought Kiyomasa. Fukushima cannot wake up without Ichinotani.

That divine weapon had always been her attack power and her method.

If seeing that was not enough to wake her...

“She will be as good as dead even if she survives.”

“You sure are nice, Kiyomasa.”

Hachisuka’s voice reached her from behind.

“You can judge this based on life.”

“Testament.” Kiyomasa felt a smile inside herself as she answered. “That must be because I judge myself based on death.”

Fukushima grabbed Ichinotani in her right hand.

The word “why” was ringing in her heart.

No, the power in her hand had been thrown to her by Kiyomasa.

Kiyomasa was telling her to come back.

Throwing down Ichinotani instead of a divine protection or spell was proof of that.

She was telling her to come back up herself. But...

“————”

Fukushima wondered if she was really allowed to not give up.

Even though she was weak.

“Kh.”

Her companion was telling her to use the power in her hand.

She was aware of her weakness. There was no point in looking away from it now.

And her companion was attempting to clear away the distortion within her.

So the rest was up to her.

...Testament.

With that word of understanding and of a contract, Fukushima began to think.

Why was she desperately searching for a reason to continue on when she had been working so hard to let herself end just a moment ago?

The answer to that question was the question itself.

Because she did not want to end. That was all there was to it.

She truly did not want to end, but she had thought it might be better to end and had tried to obey that thought.

She had simply been trying to look good.

But that had all been turned around by nothing more than Kiyomasa's message of "don't die".

So had she just wanted that girl's concern?

Pathetic. But...

"...Testament!"

Would the others forgive her for trying to end it all until now? And...

...Honestly.

Fukushima wished for it with no hesitation now.

She wished to not end.

She shook the tears from her eyes, pulled Ichinotani toward herself, and raised her voice.

"...Headfirst Fall!"

Kiyomasa saw an arcing form fly up into the night sky.

It was Fukushima.

She had pulled herself up from the fall and used that momentum to jump even higher than the others.

It was all a series of forcible actions.

When looking down earlier, Kiyomasa had seen no footholds for Fukushima to use Headfirst Fall on.

Activating Headfirst Fall in the empty air would only lead to falling.

Even if she could supply the proper direction and shift her position, she could not escape the falling motion.

But that was only without a foothold.

Fukushima had created a foothold for Headfirst Fall.

She had kicked off the countless drops of water falling with her.

“———”

And she fell.

She directed her fall toward the hull of the ironclad ship and slammed into it.

The rest was simple.

She repeatedly “fell toward” the ship’s hull and used that momentum to jump.

“So she made it back.”

Her black ponytail formed an arc as she fell from the night sky.

She fell toward the edge of the pool that had lost most of its water.

Their training was not yet over. So...

“...Here I go.”

Kiyomasa held Caledfwlch in both hands and moved forward.

She had to clear away and straighten out her companion’s distortion.


“Here I go...!”

She made a high-speed charge.

Chapter 41: Center of the Festival

第四十一章

『縁日祭の中心者』



長い時間を掛けて
ようやくに見えたもの
長い時間を掛けて
ようやくに作れたもの
配点（実力）

It took a long time

To finally see this

It took a long time

To finally create this

Point Allocation (Ability)

The exchange of attack and defense drew a circle.

The pool on top of the transport ship's bridge had lost its water.

That was why Fukushima and Kiyomasa used the circular poolside as their battlefield.

They swung their spears to send out and deflect attacks.

“————”

Sparks flew and they changed positions to move around that circle.

The clashing of metal was joined by the footsteps of approach and retreat.

The high-speed exchange was not solely reliant on repeated attacks from the left and right. They would also approach and deter their opponent from the knee or slash from the shoulder in a motion resembling a tackle.

They strung together their techniques to continue the fight and two people watched them after leaving the poolside.

They were Hachisuka and Katagiri.

Their eyes followed Fukushima and Kiyomasa's movements.

At times, Katagiri's eyes could not keep up. That was due to focusing on the movement of the spear tips instead of the girls' positions.

But he did ask a question while viewing their exchange.

“Why?” he asked. “Why are Fukushima-san's movements working now?”

“Figure it out,” Hachisuka said to Katagiri.

But she knew that was the wrong way to look at this.

...To be more accurate...

“There’s no need to figure it out.”

She understood.

There was a simple reason why Fukushima’s attacks were working on Kiyomasa.

...She’s defending now.

At first, Fukushima had only been focused on hitting Kiyomasa with her attacks.

She had been impatient.

But on the battlefield, you had to do more than just defeat your opponent; you also had to survive.

Attack and defense. Any who fought on the battlefield needed to wield both those elements at once.

It could be a pain, but it was important.

If you were prepared to block a counterattack when making a simple attack, the defender would have a much harder time striking back.

Conversely, if you were prepared to counterattack when making a simple defense, the attacker would have a much harder time attacking.

Attack and defense were not separate concepts. Combining them would give them both greater variety.

But what happened when you were missing one or the other?

...With no interceptions or counterattacks, you become a lot easier to predict.

No matter how difficult the action, if there was nothing hidden behind it, it was easy to respond to. You only had to focus on that one action.

That was the trick behind Kiyomasa’s “predictions”.

Fukushima would understand that now. So...

“She’s sharp.”

Fukushima's actions were quickly working out how to combine attack and defense.

...I am so sorry! Kiyo-dono...!

Fukushima felt sweat starting to soak her skin as she sent Ichinotani toward Kiyomasa.

This was more than just an attack. She was thinking about what to do after it was deflected, so she was prepared to spin her body.

It was an attack that could be immediately transformed into defense. It was difficult to do so with her hips solidly behind it instead of acting out of hesitant uncertainty.

But this would be how she fought *forevermore*.

She could not forget what she was doing now.

Attack and defense.

If she had been true to the fundamentals, she never would have forgotten this.

But she had forgotten.

When faced with a powerful enemy, she had grown impatient, prioritized defeating them, and forgotten to protect herself.

The problem had been exacerbated by facing gods of war which rendered defense meaningless.

She thought it was that battle which had distorted her sense of defense against powerful enemies. She had gained a habit of only avoiding the lethal attacks.

And that was how Seikai had predicted her actions.

She had been in such a hurry to defeat him that the splashing of the water was enough to read her actions.

...But...

She had a companion who had pulled her back from that.

That was the point of the previous training.

When Fukushima had been ready to let it end, Kiyomasa had sent an attack toward her face.

Fukushima had intended to let it hit her, but she had dodged it.

Her training and experience had given her a sense for avoiding danger.

And it had activated despite her intentions.

The balance of defense had still existed inside her.

Kiyomasa was probably the most relieved. And Fukushima would be the second most relieved after remembering what was inside her.

But, thought Fukushima while exchanging attacks with Kiyomasa.

...Couldn't Kiyo-dono have simply told me?

Would it have been meaningless if she had simply been told it?

Or had Kiyomasa trusted that she would realize it on her own?

Fukushima did not know.

But there was one thing she could say now.

“How about it...!?”

She had regained enough of herself to ask this question.

She was weak.

She was quick to lose her confidence and show off her weakness to gather concern.

But now she was here.

“Am I getting through to thee...!?”

She did not fear how she would be judged.

She could stand to remain focused on herself. And...

“...!”

She sent an attack to Kiyomasa.

Kiyomasa would swing both her spears, sometimes join them together, and receive Fukushima's attacks, but now...

"Testament. ...You still have a long way to go."

That was harsh, but that was definitely what the smiling voice said.

"Let's go somewhere with more space."

Because...

"This is too small for you now, Fukushima-sama."

When she heard that, Fukushima blocked Kiyomasa's attack.

And just as she caught Caledfwlch's tip on Ichinotani's shaft...

...Oh?

Kiyomasa continued toward her.

She was pushing, but she was prepared to take another action. So Fukushima jumped. And Kiyomasa used Caledfwlch's acceleration to push further.

Fukushima's body floated up.

It hovered.

And Kiyomasa leaped after her.

She arrived to her right in midair.

The two of them had left the bridge on which the pool was located and were now in the air above the deck.

Fukushima looked back and saw Kiyomasa's blonde hair spreading out in the night sky.

At the same time, she also saw the expanse of festival lights appear below them.

Students were moving here and there throughout the festival space. Those at the 8th ship in the very back heard something in the sky.

It was a metallic noise.

The loud steel sound caused some students to exchange a glance, caused others to suspect an enemy attack, and caused yet others to...

“Hey...!”

...find the source and point at it.

Up in the night sky, two swimsuited Ten Spears members were illuminated by the festival lights.

Fukushima and Kiyomasa both held their primary weapons.

“...!”

And they unleashed several clashes in midair.

“Oh,” everyone cried as they looked up to see the two of them land on the roofs of the two rows of festival stands that formed the central row.

However, they did not stop there.

Above the hustle and bustle of the people producing the festival music, Fukushima and Kiyomasa maintained their landing momentum to run forward. They accelerated along the festival stand roofs with Fukushima to port and Kiyomasa to starboard.

“———!”

They sent out and returned attacks and defense as they ran.

The two warriors scattered sparks and ran above the festival without fearing the attention on them.

“Fukushima-sama! Let’s have a race!”

“A race!? What kind of race!?”

“Testament!” Kiyomasa smiled. “A race to the front ship’s front deck. Whoever gets there first wins!”

That is simple enough, thought Fukushima.

She was sweating and showing signs of fatigue. Her body had grown

accustomed to the tension from the previous training and the fall off the ship, but she was still worn out.

But she nodded all the same.

“Testament!”

With that, she accelerated along the festival stands below her feet. But...

“...Oh.”

Kiyomasa sent an attack from the right.

This was more than just a race. It was training too. *In that case*, thought Fukushima as she raised her weapon.

That weapon was Ichinotani.

It was her divine weapon. It had been reinforced and its abilities had been strengthened, but she only used it as a spear here.

And she began an exchange of blows.

She seriously targeted her opponent’s body and legs to slow her down.

Of course, her opponent was doing the same, so she also had to defend and strike back.

Sparks flew and solid sounds split the air.

“...?”

Suddenly, she felt like the surrounding music had synced up with their movements.

But she was not just imagining it.

A dozen or so students were running along the stands on the outer edges to their left and right. She saw those boys and girls were carrying musical instruments.

“Fukushima-sama! Kiyomasa-sama! We will accompany you!”

It was the band. That concert band played during battles and formal ceremonies and it was mostly made up of P.A. Oda students. They normally played and fought with acoustic weapons on the battlefield.

They were currently dancing and singing at combat speed while running alongside the two girls. And...

“Ah...!”

A three-girl aria filled the air to port.

And that was not all.

Students were lined up and running along the pathways below them and the roofs parallel to them.

Those boys and girls were warriors and a boy in the lead looked up at them.

“Fukushima-sama! Kiyomasa-sama! What are you doing!?”

“We are training!” answered Kiyomasa.

She deflected every one of Fukushima’s attacks as she did so.

“We are training with a race to the front deck of the front ship!”

“Then...do you mind if we join in?”

Fukushima aimed her spear tip while also exchanging a glance with Kiyomasa.

Kiyomasa nodded. As did Fukushima. So...

“Thou may come!”

“Testament! ...Okay! Boys, girls, the festival’s really getting started now!”

Lernen figurs popped up all over the festival. They all relayed information about the race.

“Anyone can join in once Fukushima-sama and Kiyomasa-sama passes your position! If you then pass them and reach the front of the first ship, you win!”

“Commander! What’s the prize for winning!?”

“I’d love to get a kiss from the two of them!”

Eh? thought Fukushima.

New *lernen figurs* appeared all over.

“Getting a kiss from the two of them if you win would be wonderful!”

“Getting a kiss from the two of them if you win sounds wonderful!”

“You get a kiss from the two of them!? Wonderful!”

A game of telephone had begun and a stir ran through the front of this ship and the ships ahead of it.

...How did this end up happening?

As Fukushima wondered that, Kiyomasa smiled at her from beyond the sparking metal.

“Now we have to win.”

“Indeed.”

They took off running and several figures ran alongside them.

The ones carrying weapons were the warriors down below. Fukushima realized they were already starting to fight each other as they ran. They were yelling at each other without a hint of sarcasm.

“You idiot! I’m not about to let someone like you take that wonderful victory...!”

“We will protect their purity! So don’t even think about looking up there, boys!”

“Outta the way! Keeping up is hard enough as it is!”

They were making a lot of noise. And the students on the other roofs lightly raised their hands toward the two girls.

“Please spar with us too!”

Are you sure thou want that?

Fukushima gasped at this unexpected request, but Kiyomasa responded quietly.

“I will not hold back.”

That settled it. Fukushima continued sparring with Kiyomasa, but at the same time...

“Bring it on!”

“Testament!”

She approached the enemy.

The festival stage was a long but intermittent path.

The festival was held on the 8th through 4th ironclad ships. The decks of those 5 ships made a distance of about 1500 meters and a wild wave was racing along them.

There were four rows of festival stands and Fukushima and Kiyomasa ran along the two positioned back-to-back in the center.

They were supported from the outside by the music unit that sang and danced while running after them. The rushed movement did not disturb their music and the nimble of the non-participating students ran along behind them to watch.

The real trouble was along the left and right pathways and atop the central roofs.

The pathways were already flooded with students trying to participate in the festival and the roofs had become a large battlefield.

Some of them had already been drinking and others must have been feeling gloomy with such a major battle approaching. They all ran along the roofs, attempted to attack Fukushima and Kiyomasa, were sent flying, got into fights with their fellow runners, and tried to knock them away.

But they were all laughing.

“Ohhh...!”

One group rushed at Fukushima.

They made a simultaneous attack. They charged in with perfect unity. Instead of just arriving as a horizontal group, some of them climbed over the others to attack from above.

Fukushima responded with a brief glance toward Kiyomasa.

She sent Ichinotani’s butt toward the repeated attacks from Kiyomasa’s

Caledfwlch.

“...Oh.”

She used the knockback from Caledfwlch's attacks to repeatedly attack the charging group with Ichinotani.

She did not waste a single attack.

She judged who would reach her soonest and where an attack would be most effective and then she accurately sent the attack there.

Each attack hit and carried out its role.

There were as many audible blows as there were people and the simultaneous charge was sent flying back with the same intensity with which it had approached.

The crowd scattered behind Fukushima like a blooming flower.

“Wow,” cried the girls running on the road. “Fukushima-sama! Do that more!”

“Testament! ...Who will be my next opponent!?”

She knocked away everyone who accepted the challenge, she dodged every attack, and she kept moving forward.

The ship came to an end.

So she jumped.

She did not have a descent spell, but there was nothing to fear now.

The people following behind her, the people running alongside her, and Kiyomasa had no issue with jumping the gap.

A few of them did not quite make the distance.

“Oh, no!?”

They fell, but they only had to activate their descent spells and divine protections.

Then Fukushima landed on the next ship's stern. Kiyomasa landed next and used the momentum to launch a heavy attack, so Fukushima caught it on Ichinotani's shaft.

The music followed them. The other warriors and spectators also kept up with them.

After confirming that, Fukushima once more took off running with Kiyomasa.

She made attacks and dodged, but when their eyes met...

“—————”

There was a smile in Kiyomasa’s blue eyes.

...Honestly.

Just how much had Fukushima worried and concerned that girl?

If she tried to apologize, Kiyomasa would only tell her not to worry about it, so Fukushima said something else as she ran.

“I must apologize, everyone.”

She carried the clashing swords, music, and general noise with her as she ran.

“It is true that I have not achieved any clear victories lately. But...”

But...

“I intend to keep at it until I win. I would appreciate thy support.”

She said it.

That was how she felt now.

...I want a rematch.

She did not know when it would happen, but she wanted a true battle to wash away her previous distortion.

Honda Futayo was Musashi’s Vice Chancellor and Fukushima intended to catch up to her.

But what did everyone think of her now?

...What if they say I am relying on them too much...?

Just as some dark thoughts threatened to settle in, she heard a sound.

“—————”

She heard musical instruments. It was the brass instruments of the concert

band using the outer edges to run with them.

That was it.

What was it they had said before?

...We will accompany you.

They were not supporting or assisting her. They were simply accompanying her down that path.

The powerful music arrived from either side to support her and it seemed to tell her not to worry about anything.

And none of it ended there. The warriors below raised their voices.

“Are you done with all that depressing stuff!?”

That bright tone of voice shook Fukushima’s heart.

...That is right.

This was a festival. It was a time for purification where anything was allowed. Thus...

“Testament. ...I am done with it now!”

The number of fellow runners on the roof had grown. They were on the 7th ship and people had been waiting here after hearing the commotion from the 8th ship.

Every part of the festival was filled with fellow runners and the race continued.

Fukushima accelerated as she knocked away a would-be attacker with a roundhouse kick.

She fell forward, toward the goal of this race.

“Wow, just look at them go. Keeping the festival going was the right decision.”

The voice from the top of the 8th ship’s rear bridge belonged to Takenaka. She rested her elbow on the railing at the edge and spoke to Katagiri and

Yokosuka who were alongside her.

“Why don’t the two of you go?”

“There’s no way I could keep up...”

“I wish I’d had Genbu ready on the 4th ship.”

Takenaka smiled bitterly at Hachisuka’s comment.

“Hachisuka-kun, you say that, but you’ve never done anything like that.”

“That’s right. Hachisuka-san wouldn’t be that mean.”

Hachisuka glanced over at Katagiri’s smiling face.

“I’m not a child. ...Are you dumb?”

“This child...!” angrily shouted Katagiri while stepping back, so Takenaka rubbed his head.

“Don’t push yourself, Katagiri-kun.”

“Wh-why are you treating me like a child!?”

“Just calm down,” said Takenaka while facing forward again.

The battling group was arriving on the 6th ship, so the wave of people and its music were growing more distant.

...Ohh, they keep knocking people through the air.

Given the position, that had to have been Fukushima’s doing.

“I’m glad Fukushima-san could recover.”

“Testament. So am I. She is a decisive fighting force,” said Katagiri. “But will this change the strategy for tomorrow?”

“It’ll change it a fair bit.”

“...Then why didn’t you help with Fukushima-san’s training? Don’t tell me you just didn’t want to have your proposed strategy fall apart.”

“Putting together a strategy no matter the circumstances is a strategist’s job, so that is not a problem. While it is true I’m quite busy...well, I’m a strategist and not a trainer...”

“Sorry...”

“No, no.” Takenaka smiled bitterly. “But I am glad that Fukushima-san recovered.”

She viewed the music and commotion that was fading into the distance and she rested her chin directly on the railing. She stuck her hips up behind her and she thought she heard her clothes straining, but she decided to blame that on too much deskwork. She was still young.

“Anyway,” she said. “To earn a high return, you need a margin of high damage.”

“Um... Are you saying you’re going to put Fukushima-san and the others in danger?”

“Winning is what matters in this world.”

“But,” said Katagiri, which Takenaka thought showed how seriously he took this.

...I don't take things seriously enough...

But just thinking that was not enough. Fortunately, Hachisuka helped out.

“We just have to slip past the high damage.”

And...

“The Testamenta Arma.”

“Oh, yeah.” Katagiri nodded. “Takenaka-san, you’ll protect them once, won’t you?”

“But I’ve taken that into consideration when planning my strategy.”

Takenaka could only smile bitterly.

...Will they work hard at doing their part?

She made it sound like that was someone else’s problem, but it actually was. But for now...

“I really am glad that Fukushima-san recovered.”

“I know what you mean.”

“Testament. Earlier, I was planning out our strategy and eating an anchovy pizza, but it turned out to be too much for me. And when I opened up a window to vomit, Fukushima-san was running by outside using Headfirst Fall. ...I was right not to rush the vomiting. I would’ve been hit by a counterattack.”

“L-let’s not copy old video games like that!”

“Oh, yeah. There was one where you climb a wall and people open the window to ero ero on you, wasn’t there?”

But when she looked out ahead.

“Oh, they’re moving from the 5th ship to the 4th ship.”

It seemed the people here were not calling it quits just yet. The festival had shifted to where Fukushima was.

When the people running the stands realized those stands had been broken and all the customers had left, they gave up making repairs or calling for customers.

“Dammit! I’m going to charge them for this...!”

“Yeah! Let’s charge the adults for this...!”

It was reassuring how they took off running with knives and rolling pins in hand. The defeated students were still trying to recover, but when they noticed those cooks, they quickly started running again.

They sure have lots of energy, thought Takenaka. And...

...Oh.

The commotion at the head of the group had grown even larger.

They had arrived on the 4th ship.

Fukushima was in the lead.

The 4th ship group was doing a good job of fighting back. They were all waiting at the stern with weapons at the ready.

They were only allowed to attack Fukushima and Kiyomasa after the girls had

passed them. So a *lernen figur* opened at the spot where Fukushima landed.

“Mark the line...!”

With a shout from the student in command, a *lernen figur* floated above Fukushima’s head.

A red line extended to port and starboard. That was the offside line. And once that line passed someone...

“Commence attack...!”

Swords produced a high-speed rush of attacks and accelerating Fukushima spun around backwards.

She struck.

A series of solid sounds rang out and their number increased each time she accelerated. But the students pursuing her were also numerous.

She jumped to the festival stand roofs and began running while a crashing wave of students raced after her.

They were all using acceleration spells and some even used mobile shells.

“Please spar with us...!”

And just as they caught up, a figure leaped between them and Fukushima.

It was Kiyomasa. She turned toward the charging students, and...

“Oh, dear.”

She counterattacked with Caledfwlch as if she had only just noticed them.

“———!?”

The group leading the charge crumbled and those behind them were caught in the collapsing pile.

The recoil of the strike pushed Kiyomasa forward, but students rushed toward her as well.

“Please spar with us!”

There were girls as well as boys. And there was plenty of infighting, so a lot of them were knocked away during their approach. However, they did manage to

catch up to Kiyomasa.

“Special Technique: Quantity Over Quality!”

Kiyomasa was hit by the word “overwhelming”.

But just as she was going to be overrun, someone pulled forward on her arm.



It was Fukushima. And...

“...Headfirst Fall.”

With that quiet statement, she blatantly jumped a distance of several steps with Kiyomasa.

“Ah,” said the students left without a target. “You can work together!?”

“This is no more than a race!”

Fukushima pulled on Kiyomasa’s arm and partially held her in her arm, but then she tossed her away.

Kiyomasa smiled in the air.

“Fukushima-sama!”

They were now side by side atop the central festival stands. The din of pursuers approached behind them and Kiyomasa smiled while sweat flew from her.

“You wanted to spar, didn’t you!?”

With that, the two of them ran back to back. When the charging students caught up in greater and greater number, the two girls began fighting back while occasionally swapping positions.

Kiyomasa smiled as she ran and attacked their pursuers.

...Thank goodness.

This was the one person who was always out ahead of her and she was glad that person had returned.

But that was not because she did not want to stand in the lead. She would do her duty and she knew what was possible and impossible for her.

If she knew what the result would be, nothing would faze her. She was prepared for that.

But Fukushima was different.

Her possibilities and impossibilities were less certain and could waver. And

like they had seen here, there were times when she fell below and times when she rose above.

What about now? Kiyomasa wondered about Fukushima.

So she ended this time in which they ran back to back and fought back together.

...I can find out with a single attack.

She had seen this during the day.

Fukushima had subconsciously taken a certain action.

Kiyomasa forcibly accelerated her step to reproduce that. She moved out ahead of Fukushima.

“...Here goes!”

She made her attack.

Fukushima realized the race was ending.

They were already on the final ship and they had passed the halfway point on its deck.

Kiyomasa had moved out ahead and struck with Caledfwlch.

The first attack was a stab to the right.

She held the blade out horizontally and targeted Fukushima's neck with the half-sickle portion more than the tip.

But Fukushima dodged it. She sank down and shifted into an acceleration prep stance to do so.

She looked up to see Kiyomasa already preparing for a second attack.

That was the true attack. She was making a diagonal swing down at Fukushima's ducking body.

So Fukushima moved forward.

...If I can dodge this to the left or right...

Then she could attack Kiyomasa on the way past her.

But just as she considered that, she saw Kiyomasa move.

She let go of her second attack to the left.

“...”

Her left hand grabbed the wrist that had made the right stab.

It was a forceful action, but if she pulled her right hand down...

...The horizontal attack will be pulled down to my level!?

That was exactly what happened.

Fukushima's ducking vision saw the half-sickle blade dropping down toward her.

It was going to hit.

It happened just as she ducked down. Her center of gravity was lowered and she could not swing her body to either side.

Moving forward would be the best plan, but that would send her right into the half-sickle.

But, thought Fukushima.

...It will not hit me.

For some reason, that was what she thought.

Yes, she thought as she realized why she felt that way.

Her actions and the flow of battle fit together.

So if she moved forward, obeyed her forward-stepping leg, and moved her body down and up...

“————”

It would not hit.

Kiyomasa saw it.

It was the same as during the day. Fukushima passed right through something

that clearly should have hit her. Or it looked that way to Kiyomasa.

During the day, it had been a metal beam.

Now, it was Caledfwlch.

Fukushima passed through the forcibly-lowered blade and approached Kiyomasa.

But Kiyomasa understood that Fukushima had not passed through the object either time.

...She is using the “ideal movements” of an expert...!

Those movements were created by the speed and decision control of Vice Chancellor level fighters like Shibata or Honda Futayo.

By using extremely precise movement control with nothing going to waste, they could evade anything and everything while still moving in to attack.

Fukushima had been capable of that before, but her “ideal movements” had been based on her position control and had essentially comprised of creating a launch pad for her acceleration.

This “ideal movement” was different.

Instead of just involving movement or attitude control, she charged forward while evading.

...This is it...

This had to be the territory the other experts had reached.

With this high level “ideal movement”, the movement of attack and the evasion or positioning of defense were combined.

Shibata had done it with his great strength and reflexes.

Honda Futayo had done it with her speed and balance.

Fukushima did it with her attack and defense control.

Each optimization possessed the idiosyncrasies of the method used, but...

“Fukushima-sama...!”

She has it, realized Kiyomasa.

Fukushima had the power needed to face the monstrous opponents awaiting them in Paris.

Kiyomasa was prepared to fight tomorrow and she knew the others would be too.

But Fukushima had only just now reached that point. She had regained her original “ideal movement” and grasped something even greater.

Of course, it was not perfect. Most likely, she was only vaguely aware of it and would be unable to use it as she wished.

...But...!

Sensing hope inside her, Kiyomasa leaped back.

Pushing down the right Caledfwlch had also been a way to prepare to jump.

While forcibly pulling back her right arm, she made a powerful jump backwards.

Her left hand grabbed Caledfwlch’s left blade from where she had released it into the air before.

“Let’s do this!”

With Fukushima in front of her and the goal behind her, Kiyomasa made an attack.

She swung both Caledfwlchs toward the center and spoke with strength in her voice.

“Finish this, Caledfwlch!!”

Fukushima jumped.

She ran along the top of the festival stands.

...Make it...!

She repeatedly accelerated with Headfirst Fall to pull away from the pursuers. And...

“Ohh...!”

Caledfwlch was closing in from the right and left.

She passed through the center.

...I can make it...!

She launched her body forward. And she fell toward...

“...Huh?”

She must have miscounted the number of steps. She had meant to make a decisive attack on Kiyomasa, but she had taken a half-step too far.

“Ah.”

She fell headfirst into Kiyomasa’s chest.

Kiyomasa understood what had happened, but she did not understand what was going on.

Fukushima had miscounted her steps because of her movement optimization. The step she would normally have used on defense had instead been used on approaching Caledfwlch and that had caused a discrepancy.

But as a result, Fukushima had pressed her face into Kiyomasa’s chest and Kiyomasa had caught her.

“Kyah...!”

The problem was how she was swinging Caledfwlch closed.

That movement caused her to embrace Fukushima.

“Ah.”

The attack from the combined Caledfwlch pressurized beyond Fukushima.

The unleashed power flew toward the group approaching them from behind. And as a result...

“Eh?”

The power launched them all horizontally toward the stern of the ship.

Everyone saw it happen.

A wave of people was blasted above the festival being held on the 300m transport ship's deck.

They were just high enough to skim along the festival stand roofs, so the festival itself was not damaged.

And as those people flew through the air...

“Dammiiiiit!”

“I should’ve gone in from the side!”

“But this way we got to see her face pressing into her chest!”

They sounded satisfied and those who were not hit saw who reached the bridge before anyone else.

It was Fukushima.

Earlier, that girl with the fluttering ponytail had been held in Kiyomasa's arms along with the twin half-sickle spears.

But when she landed softly on the deck, she set down Kiyomasa who she held in her arms.

They realized everyone had come to a stop.

The band stood unmoving on the left and right festival stands and the dancers remained motionless while up on one leg or doing a handstand.

How would they end this?

As everyone watched expectantly, Fukushima moved.

She placed Kiyomasa in front of her and relaxed her shoulders. And...

“Thou arrived first, Kiyo-dono.”

Because...

“It was thou who brought me here.”

“Then, um...”

Kiyomasa observed their surroundings.

Despite her attention, everyone remained entirely motionless and simply watched. So...

“...I feel like this was supposed to be the other way around.”

She pressed her lips to Fukushima’s cheek.

After only a few seconds, she removed her mouth from Fukushima’s cheek and looked to everyone else.

“Everyone,” she said. “Let us enjoy ourselves tomorrow.”

Everyone responded to those words and the current situation.

They raised their voices and stomped their feet as one.

“———!”

A roaring cheer shook the night.

Chapter 42: Chicks of the Gathering Nest

第四十二章

『集い巢の雛達』



開き直らずとも
意外に楽しく
戸惑いは贅沢で
配点（撮影会）

There is no need to grow stubborn

When surprisingly enjoyable

Confusion is a luxury

Point Allocation (Photo Shoot)

Festival flames wavered in the southern sky.

The Roi-Soleil viewed them from atop Paris's wall. He was surrounded by *Belle de Marionnette* guards and he voiced his thoughts from the stone wall.

"Enemy though they may be, festivals have such wonderful atmospheres. I can just sense the enjoyment radiating from it."

He received a response from below.

"Hashiba does love their luxuries. Even if this is only a recreation, they do their entertainment right."

"Testament. So even with your grudge against Hashiba, you can still judge them fairly there. ...Flying Katou."

"Testament," said an old man kneeling beside the Roi-Soleil.

He looked to the left and right.

"Where are Bernard and his dragons?"

"At the northern beach. ...They said they will have fish for dinner. They brought some white wine with them."

"A Celestial Dragon is sharing a meal with Terrestrial Dragons?"

"Do you have a family, Danzou?"

The old man, Danzou, fell briefly silent at that question. And finally...

"...I left them in Sanada."

"Great Teacher! Great Teacher! There you are! I've been looking for you!"

Seikai ran up the stairs to the top of the wall and the Roi-Soleil smiled and pointed at him.

“Your home town must have been lots of fun.”

“Testament. My incompetent students are such an embarrassment. ...Excuse me.”

Danzou stood up and walked toward Seikai with audible footsteps.

“What is wrong with you!? You are in the presence of the Roi-Soleil, so make sure you kneel!”

“Oh, my apologies. Great Teacher. Here is a souvenir from Sanada.”

“Huh...? Seikai, I hear you have been good at this sort of thing ever since you were in Shikoku, but...ohhh, are these *konetsuke mochi*!? You...wait, how did you forget my favorite: the mincemeat one!?”

“Oh, my apologies, Great Teacher. There was a starving man on the way here and what kind of Sanada ninja would I be if I didn’t save his life? ...Yes, and that starving man was me.”

“Damn yooooou!!”

“Ha ha. You two get along so well.”

Danzou and Seikai turned toward the Roi-Soleil’s laughter. Danzou forced Seikai’s head down and the Roi-Soleil cast his gaze across Paris.

“Look.”

“Testament,” said everyone else as they looked to Paris.

They saw a giant festival pot there.

Paris’s interior had been divided by stealth barriers to keep anyone from seeing in, but now only a largescale barrier covered it from above. Since the battle had yet to start, the interior barriers had been removed so everyone could see each other, so the city could air out, and...

“—————”

...so a festival could be held.

Tables lined with food filled the streets and kegs of wine and beer were prepared here and there.

“...!”

People spoke, told stories, laughed, and danced together.

Mouses ran around the city and occasionally used a spell to launch fireworks.

No part of the city was left dark and even the shadows of the buildings and *Lourd de Marionnettes* were faded by the lighting from multiple directions.

Armand spoke from among the guards viewing that scene.

“Humans are such a mystery. Why do you hold festivals like this? If you wish to pray for victory, then you only need to pray, so why do you cause such a commotion in the name of ‘celebration’? It feels like it contaminates your prayers if you ask me.”

He was answered by Henri who stood on the other side of the guards. She looked across Paris and viewed the festival permeating every centimeter of it.

“They want an excuse to cause a commotion, Armand. If they can find one of those, they will cause a commotion no matter the time or place. Also, drinking alcohol and eating meat is a ritual for accepting that power into their bodies as a blessing. So they do have a justification, Armand.”

“That is an interesting interpretation, Henri, Armand.” The Roi-Soleil gave a “heh” of laughter. “But the people of Paris are hard workers, Henri, Armand. I mean, I live here and yet they do not throw a festival every single day. What can you call that if not a dedication to hard work?”

Seikai tilted his head.

“Roi-Soleil, don’t they actually treat you pretty bad-...”

Danzou hit him to knock him down onto the floor.

The Roi-Soleil ignored that solid sound and turned his gaze back to the southern sky and then the east.

“Now, we have the larger festival, Hashiba. ...Has anyone predicted when the battle will begin tomorrow?”

“Testament,” said Henri. “Hashiba is even now continuing the reinforcement of its construction work. We believe the battle will begin tomorrow afternoon

at 2.”

“So a major counterattack for a post-lunch workout? Not bad. ...Terumoto’s group begins at 1 in the afternoon, so they are starting before us.”

The Roi-Soleil crossed his arms and nodded into the eastern sky.

“I wonder if Terumoto, Musashi’s phony nudist, the Reine des Garous, and the rest are enjoying themselves below that sky.”

“E-excuse me, um, I know you must be enjoying yourselves, but, uh, my room has been squashed in a whole lot,” said Toori.

“Judge. ...We needed our own living space.”

Horizon responded while laying out her futon. Kimi and Asama did the same with theirs, but Mitotsudaira was speaking with her parents who were sitting at the hallway end of the room.

“Um, mother, father? You will be using my king’s parents’ bedroom, so you can go get ready there.”

“Oh, Nate. Are you embarrassed? Don’t worry. We are more than ready already.”

For what? wondered Mitotsudaira with a cold sweat, but she decided it would be best not to ask. Her mother would provide a demonstration.

Then a silhouette approached on the other side of the hallway curtain.

“Hey, you okay?”

It was her king.

So she made eye contact with everyone. Horizon and Asama nodded and Kimi picked up a pillow and started slapping it, saying “C’mon! C’mon!” Mitotsudaira ignored that last one.

“Everything is fine, my king.”

“Judge. I’ve brought some food, but what order should we use for the bath? Should I go first?”

Her king opened the curtain and stepped in. Her father reacted to that question.

Her father looked exactly the same as he had in the past and he must have been somewhat cautious of her king because he bowed toward him.

Then her father gestured toward the hallway and spoke.

“Oh, my wife and I can go either last or first.”

“Ohh,” breathed Asama and Kimi.

Kimi elbowed Asama’s shoulder and Asama responded with a serious expression.

“So they take their baths together...”

“My, my... And I was just about to say he seemed so reserved.”

“That was a trick, wasn’t it!? A trick question!”

Mitotsudaira’s mother narrowed her eyes in a smile.

“Don’t worry. We are borrowing someone else’s bath here, so we’ll make sure to be done in only 2 hours.”

Done with what? wondered Mitotsudaira with a cold sweat in her heart, but she decided it would be best not to ask. Her mother would explain.

Then her king carried in the tray he had left out in the hallway.

“Okay, let’s eat. For Horizon and sis, I have apple pie. For Asama, I have that white peach pie you were eyeing when Bell-san took it home with her. ...For Nate, I have a duck crush pie. For Mito’s mom, I have a smoked steak with the Aoi family recipe jam. For her dad, I have a citrus mousse.”

“I-isn’t one of those more involved than the others?”

“Nate, being a mother is not easy,” said her mother.

“Yes, but let’s eat.”

With that, her father looked to her mother and her before pressing his hands together.

...Ah.

It had been a while since she did this family ritual.

Her father must have been fairly nervous. Both her memories of him and the periodic divine mails he sent her told her how thoughtful a person he was.

As a daughter living far away from home, that had been reassuring and appreciated. But scenes like this showed his thoughtfulness in a different light.

Wise Sister: "...I know this is rude, but he's like a small animal."

Asama: "Eh!? I thought you were going to call him a rare beast!"

Flat Vassal: "W-wow, I wish I could see this!"

Silver Wolf: "Should we really leave this open to the entire class!?"

But the next thing she knew, Horizon, Kimi, Asama, and her king were doing the same thing as her father.

...Tomo, is this okay from a religious perspective?

She gave Asama a look and the girl shrugged.

Asama: "Shinto isn't very strict."

That was somewhat reassuring but also worrying in a different way.

But her father began to speak.

"Meeting new people is the greatest blessing God has given us, so we should make our farewells as fulfilling as possible. Amen."

That varied a little too much from a standard pre-meal prayer, but that was the way of things in her family.

She had not understood what it meant when she was younger, but now she felt like she did.

...That is not limited to mealtimes.

After what had happened in Hexagone Française and M.H.R.R., she could see how much more was included in that prayer.

"...Wait, mother! Why are you already eating!?"

"Wh-what are you talking about? I'm only separating out your father's portion...oh, this is so good."

“Are you eating it without even noticing!?”

“Oh, Nate, you eat yours too,” said her king.

But everyone relaxed after her king poured them some tea from the teapot. Mitotsudaira saw her father eating a scrap of meat her mother gave him.

He must have been nervous being in someone else’s home.

He was scooted right next to his wife and just about leaning against her while he ate.

In front of the king, he hung his head a bit as he placed the fork in his mouth.

“ ...”

And he stopped.

...Eh?

Mitotsudaira panicked when her father stopped moving.

Had he eaten something bad?

He had always liked cooking. Her king was also a good cook, but her father had his preferences.

Was the food prepared for his wife’s tastes not working out for him?

But he suddenly resumed moving.

He used his fork to get some of the sauce on his wife’s steak plate and placed it in his mouth.

“...Nn.”

Hearing that, the king stopped drinking his tea and turned around.

“Is something the matter?”

“Eh?” said her father with a start.

He instantly blushed and hesitated, but...

“Did you make this?”

Kimi waved her arms left and right in an exaggerated fashion, but they

ignored her.

The king nodded lightly toward the father.

“Judge. How is it?”

“...It’s interesting. Oh, it tastes fine. I’m sure Miss Loup-Garou likes it too.”

“Miss Loup-Garou?” asked Asama with a tilt of her head.

...Th-that’s what he calls her when they’re alone!

But Mitotsudaira could not exactly say that. Meanwhile, her mother smiled bitterly and lightly tapped her father’s shoulder.

“It tastes good. I served you this when you were at our house, so you made some modifications to that, didn’t you? ...You made it a little sourer, and...”

“Yes,” continued the father.

He may have been intentionally supporting what his wife had said. He stabbed his fork into the fruit in the sauce on her plate.

“The flavor is quite good.”

He sounded somewhat excited.

But instead of stopping himself, he leaned forward and asked the king a question.

“I can make something similar with an apple jam, but it wouldn’t have this consistency. ...What is this?”

“Oh, I took quinces pickled in sugar and sliced them up.”

“Quinces?” asked the mother. She made a circle with her index finger and thumb. “Aren’t those only this big?”

“Those are Western quinces, which are also known as Western loquats. The Eastern ones have fist-sized fruits.”

“Oh?”

Both parents focused on the king.

The king responded to their gazes with a slicing gesture.

“I thought they would give some nice texture behind the meat. It would be a little much on a daily basis, but these things are important at times like this, right?”

“I see,” said the father while the mother used her knife to taste just the sauce portion.

“The ingredient has some real volume to it. But it doesn’t have a cloying smell and it’s more like an apple than anything...”

“They’re from the rose family just like apples, so that’s probably why they have a nice scent. But they’re too hard to eat as-is, so you need to pickle them in something first. But that hardness makes it easier to slice them up for a sauce like this. I gave Nate some before and she quite liked it.”

“My.” The mother turned toward Mitotsudaira, narrowed her eyes, and laughed. “Sounds like he’s really taking care of you.”

Heat instantly filled her body and an unpleasant sweat soaked her.

But her father looked to her king and her.

“Really?”

“Eh? Um, uh, the quinces were, uh, well, from one of the times he brought food to my place...”

None of that denied what her mother had said.

But her father smiled a little.

“I’m glad.”

...*Eh?*

Just as she thought about what that meant, her king asked her a question.

“But, Nate. ...Did I ever manage to reproduce Nate Papan’s sauce?”

Only then did Mitotsudaira realize what her father’s words had meant.

Ah, thought Asama.

This is a very important time.

So she held her breath.

She did not want to intrude on this short but dense time between her friend and that friend's parents. So...

...Do your best.

Asama supported her friend in her heart.

I know you can do it, Mito.

...Yes.

Because you can even speak with your mom now.

...Judge.

Mitotsudaira regulated her breathing and understood everything.

She understood what her father had meant with "I'm glad".

He was not saying he was glad for himself. He was saying he was glad for her.

But she could not just leave it like that.

She had to quickly reply that he was overthinking this.

So she leaned forward and spoke to her father.

She placed a hand on her chest while putting on an expression that was not too insistent.

"I don't think anyone can make the meat dishes you do, father."

So...

"Could you cook some tomorrow, maybe? The bottled sauce just isn't the same."

She saw her father's eyes widen slightly before he finally smiled a little.

"Really?"

He smiled toward her king.

"Thank you."

It was a short exchange.

But for Mitotsudaira...

...Yes.

I'm glad, she thought.

Her father had a reserved personality, so when he accepted that there was someone here who would feed her, he must have decided to hand over everything.

He had decided that his daughter no longer needed him.

That was what it meant to let your child go. But that way of doing it meant making your child into a stranger. That was one way of doing it, but when looking at how he felt about it...

Hori-ko: "He said thank you... Good job."

That was it.

Her king had created a compromise.

He could feed the wolf who had come to his house, but only the wolf's family could cook the food of her family.

So as his daughter, she had been able to say there was no need to throw that out.

...I'm glad.

Mitotsudaira repeated her father's words with both meanings.

That exchange had allowed her to demonstrate that she would be fine living away from her parents while also maintaining that bond with them.

She probably would have noticed what was going on regardless, but given the timing and her own personality, she was not sure she could have handled it quite so well.

...Thank you, my king.

And just as she breathed a mental sigh...

Wise Sister: "Heh heh. Now you have the approval of both parents!"

Kimi's words clued Mitotsudaira into the true meaning of what had just happened.

Asama felt heat radiating from Mitotsudaira.

Everyone had finished eating their food and the wolf's parents were discussing cooking with him.

But Mitotsudaira had yet to touch her own food.

...That hit her pretty hard...

One's own awareness and someone else's acknowledgement were two very different things.

Mitotsudaira had viewed her mother as an enemy and was seeing her father for the first time in a long time. As for what that meant...

Hori-ko: "Her parents seem to be raising death flags like crazy. Will they be okay?"

Asama: "Well, there's always the example of Tenzou-kun. He raised death flags like crazy, but managed to survive and even brought a wife back with him."

10ZO: "Th-that was a man's determination! It was determination!"

Meanwhile, Mitotsudaira's parents and he began exchanging divine mail addresses. They also checked a cooking site, but was that a page Mitotsudaira's parents had made?

...Toori-kun is so good at making friends...

Asama could do it as part of the shrine business, but she was not sure she could do it so naturally. She tended to erect walls around her using her position as the Asama Shrine Representative.

But after their discussion, Mitotsudaira's mother turned toward her daughter.

"Okay, Nate. We've eaten some meat, so we'll take our bath first."

"Are you going to stay in there for two hours?"

The daughter sighed, but it was not her parents who reacted. Nor was it him.

It was Kimi. She watched him leave with the stack of plates.

“Okay, let’s have some fun with a photo shoot. To celebrate you moving in.”

“A photo shoot?”

Asama asked, but she did know what that meant.

They would sometimes do that when gathered at someone’s house.

Kimi seemed to have been fine-tuning a photography spell originally meant for taking pictures of yourself or the scenery.

“We made body pillows for everyone before, didn’t we...?”

“Yes.” Horizon nodded. “Who will be the victims this time?”

“H-Horizon, you’re plotting something, aren’t you!?”

Kimi narrowed her eyes at Mitotsudaira’s yelled words. She crawled over and rested her cheek on Asama’s thigh.

“Asama? Mitotsudaira? You brought swimsuits with you, didn’t you?”

“Eh?”

She had seen right through them.

Asama thought about lying, but she could not. Her substitutions kept her from lying.

She tried to figure out what to do, but the words left her before she settled on anything.

“U-umm, I-I did, but...yes, I brought one.”

“Of course you did. You have one for the jacuzzi and your morning purification when you sleep over somewhere.”

That was true.

When doing the morning purification alone, she would do it naked, but when with someone else, it was easier on the other person if she wore a swimsuit. When taking a bath, she would end up doing purifying acts along with them, but when doing a formal purification, she would use the swimsuit.

...And during our sleepovers, everyone gets drunk, talks about indecent things, and snacks like crazy, so I end up with so much impurity...

She had a set prepared for the morning purification when spending the night at someone else's house.

As for Mitotsudaira's swimsuit...

"Yes, Suzu-san and I prepared a new one for Mito. It combines the design of the one Mito has been using with the Asama Shrine's charm unit. Since Mito's kept almost coming off during the study camp."

"Nate... You have nothing for the swimsuit to hold onto, do you?"

"Th-that had more to do with someone nearly taking it off of me!"

Yes, that may have been the case.

But however she had interpreted this, Kimi gave a nasal laugh.

"Then let's get started. While Mitotsudaira's maman and papan are enjoying themselves."

"Wh-what about me!? I could crossdress and...gfh!"

The crossdresser stuck his head through the curtain and Horizon downed him in the same turn.

...What is even going on?

But anyway, thought Asama. Kimi is probably trying to help us relax.

They could free themselves to a state of near nudity in this room.

For Mitotsudaira, that was probably a lot like putting her scent on the place or building her den. For Asama, it let her judge her "freedom" in this space.

He was doing the same. When he had brought them the food here...

...He was showing us that this is our home.

Eating was a personal act.

They had been served the pies and breads they were familiar with at the Main Blue Thunder, while Mitotsudaira's parents were served dinner food and different sorts of sweets. Asama could see the meaning there.

Those two were guests and the others lived here.

“...What am I even supposed to say about this?”

With that, Asama looked to the curtain wall.

...I don't have to set up a barrier, do I?

She used that as her own form of allowance and then she nodded to Kimi.

“We have a battle to fight tomorrow, so how about we enjoy ourselves some tonight?”

“Oh, you're onboard?”

“Well.” Asama felt a belated blush on her cheeks. “You'll make it a fun photo shoot, won't you? It's our first day here, after all.”

The next morning was cloudy.

They were not rain clouds and they did not entirely obscure the sky. The summer air currents had created a thick layer of clouds over coastal Odawara and it was spreading out and flowing toward the sea.

The summer sunlight above made the low clouds glow dully. Below them, several forces were gathering in the sky above Odawara.

Houjou, Mouri, and Musashi were there. Mogami's Yamagata Castle arrived from the north, as did Sviet Rus's Fukushima Castle and its accompanying aerial ships.

First, the Houjou fleet took its position in the sky to secure air superiority and manage the battlefield. The other fleets passed by below it.

Next, Sviet Rus moved to the west of Odawara while Mogami and Musashi moved to the east.

P.A. Oda's Kanie Castle had arrived ahead of the rest, so it was positioned in an artificial lake to the north.

Finally, the Mouri fleet set up its formation in the south.

“Now then, everyone. At noon, Odawara will be opened up as a battlefield.

Everyone within every group exchanged a glance and nodded at Houjou Ujinao's divine transmission.

Each force's warriors set up a formation around Odawara Castle and the city. They were preparing for a festival.

Just like with Hashiba, each camp was setting up a festival at Odawara.

Of course, what really mattered were the representatives who would participate in the battle.

They were individuals, but they were also the representatives of nations.

"National interests are at stake here, so we can't hold back."

Just as Houjou Shigenaga said on the Fukushima Castle, they were all fully focused on preparing for their duels.

The festival was beginning.

●小田原征伐●



「姉ちゃん! 姉ちゃん! 小田原征伐始まるけど、大体どんな感じになってるわけ!?!」



「フフフ小弟、一応はこんな地形でやってるのよ?」



「意外に昔のゲームみたいな構成だな……。町をクリアしたら城に行って、最後は迷宮か……」



「忍者主人公のサイドビューゲームとか、大体そんな感じだったわねえ」



「でもコレトップビュー? あ、今の時代は3Dか! エロMOD入れようぜ!」



「おーいゲーム脳。ゲーム脳。戻ってきなさい!」

Study:

Siege of Odawara

Toori: Sis! Sis! The Siege of Odawara is starting, but what's that gonna be like!?

Kimi: Heh heh heh. Siege brother, this is what the terrain looks like.

Top left: Mountains

Top middle: Forest

Top right: Road

Diagonal white rectangle: Kanie Castle

Black oval: Artificial Lake

White square on right: Musashi Camp

Circle around Musashi Camp: Hill

White rectangle on left: Odawara Castle

Bottom: Odawara City

Toori: Looks like something from an old game... You clear the city, go to the castle, and complete a maze in the end...

Kimi: Yes, that is generally how it worked with side-scrolling games starring ninjas.

Toori: But this is a top-down view? Oh, yeah! Everything's 3D these days! Let's put in some nude mods!

Kimi: Hey, gamer boy. Gamer boy. Focus on reality here.

Chapter 43: Waiters on the Standby Platform

第四十三章

『控え壇の待ち人達』



始まる期待を
何と名付けよう
世界はこれから変わるのだ
配点（歴史）

What should we name

The expectation of something beginning?

The world is about to change

Point Allocation (History)

Naruze was not participating in the duels, so she was managing the shipments to be sent out.

...This is a lot more exciting than the events or my usual work.

She had that fairly obvious thought while checking the cargo being carried down from the Musashi via transport ship.

Most of it was festival supplies for the Siege of Odawara's spectators, and...

"There's also a prefabricated pool, but the equipment for attack on Takigawa's Kanie Castle looks pretty dangerous."

They were transporting cutting-edge equipment and backups. She heard a voice behind her as she piled that up with the other cargo.

"...Oh, what's the matter, Asama-san, 5th Special Duty Officer? You two look really tired."

Within the Musashi battle formation bordering the ocean, Adele asked that question while setting down some cargo using Raging Beast.

The mobile shell carried the cargo on its tail ballast and arms while looking to the terrace made from one of the wide block packages for the Musashi's surface. Everyone's cargo and food had been brought to that terrace where Asama and Mitotsudaira looked nearly lifeless.

They were lying on top of the cargo, but Adele looked to someone else as well.

"The Chancellor looks pretty dead too. Did something happen?"

Looks like it wasn't anything sexual, thought Naruze as she looked to Asama

and Mitotsudaira.

None of them were scheduled to fight today. However...

“If things get bad, we’re supposed to force our way in for a rescue...so do those two need a healing spell or something?”

“No, we’re fine... We are.”

Asama, who was wearing her shrine maiden outfit, sat up. Next to her, Mitotsudaira fixed the hem of her summer uniform and also straightened up.

“Just out of curiosity, did something happen?”

“Well, last night, we had one of Kimi’s famous...y’know, photo shoots.”

“Oh, yeah. She did one of those for that Asama Shrine ad and for those body pillows. Did Mitotsudaira do it too this time?”

“Judge.” Mitotsudaira took a breath. “And, well, I got up a little early this morning, thinking I could cook some breakfast for my king. I was hoping to show off a bit since my parents are here.”

“And?”

“Judge. The photos she took last night were blown up to poster size and pasted all over the restaurant’s walls.”

“Oh, so that’s why Kimi asked me about a 24-hour printmaking shop last night. I told her about Hemisphere Printing’s Musashi office.”

“So you helped her with this!?”

Naruze decided not to mention that she got a discount for referrals.

“But wait. You’re exhausted because there were posters everywhere?”

“Yes. The two of us hurriedly tore them all down, but there were even more below them...” said Asama.

“And she had devilishly set it up so the more we removed, the less clothing we were wearing in them...” added Mitotsudaira.

“I can see why you couldn’t just stop partway through...”

“Yes. And the last 5 layers were woodcut boards bolted to the frame. We

couldn't just fold those up, tear them apart, and throw them away, so we had to smash them up in the backyard..."

"You've had an exciting morning." Naruze scratched her head with her pen. "Now, what happened with breakfast?"

"Judge. My father ended up making it."

"Huh? Then why's that idiot collapsed over there?"

"Well," said Asama as she began to move.

She opened a sign frame over the idiot lying on the cargo. It was a large, light-blocking one.

The sky was cloudy, but the sun was shining through the clouds. Asama placed the idiot in the sign frame's shade.

"Toori-kun...well, to give us space for our room, Horizon squished his room a lot smaller, so all he managed to do last night was clear enough space to sleep."

"...Wait."

"What is it, Naruze?"

"At times like that, you're supposed to invite him into your futon."

"Huh?" asked Asama.

After a moment, she realized what that meant and began stammering along with Mitotsudaira: "N-no, that's, um..."

She frantically glanced over at Mitotsudaira.

"That wasn't really an option last night. Was it, Mito?"

"J-judge! We had a lot to deal with after the photo shoot, like pinning down Kimi when she came to grope us or capturing Horizon's arms as they crawled around."

Horizon raised both arms where she was sorting through cargo on the other side of the terrace.

Seeing that, Naruze had no choice but to sigh in exasperation.

"Are you two going to survive living there?"

The two girls answered by sitting on the cargo shoulder to shoulder.

“ ... ”

And like before, they collapsed into a heap.

Naruze had apparently said something she should not have.

But, she thought. Mary looked over at them and smiled while counting the cargo shipments with Tenzou.

Mary could see emotions, so she must have been able to tell they were enjoying this.

...Then I don't have to hesitate here.

She knew what her next doujinshi would be about. She would discuss it with Margot while viewing the battle today.

Okay, she thought to build her excitement. Just then, someone arrived from the western path leading to Odawara.

It was Neshinbara.

“Hey.” He waved and called out to them. “It’s about time to get the participants ready. After you enter the city, Houjou says they’ll send you some information on a sign frame!”

Yoshiaki set foot on the ground for the first time in half a day.

She was alongside the Musashi group, but she was below the Yamagata Castle which had landed. She watched the students unloading cargo from the transport ship and preparing it all.

“Nn...”

She stretched and then spoke to Shakenobe next to her.

“It has been so long since I set foot on land away from home. I never actually descended to the surface when we attacked the Ariake or went to watch the Battle of Kanagawa.”

Someone spoke to her as she removed her jacket.

It was Yoshiyasu.

The girl had a “Satomi Clan” armband attached to her waist hard point and she raised a hand from the direction of the Musashi group.

“Are you ready yet? They’re calling for us down there.”

“Hurrying will not hasten things if we are not all on the same page. I would like to ensure a means of food distribution on the battlefield.”

“Do you think this will be a long battle?”

Yoshiyasu stopped at a point 5 meters away and Yoshiaki nodded.

“When people this powerful gather, each battle will wreak havoc on the land. And since you cannot draw out your full strength on ravaged land, the individual battlefields will scatter early on. And...”

And...

“Later on, anyone who finds an advantageous position on the ravaged battlefield will wait there.”

“...So we need to make the first attack and challenge them there?”

“No.” Yoshiaki smiled. “Once the initial battles are complete, we will see some political moves. While I can make all the decisions for myself, the other nations will need to discuss things with their leaders. ...So about halfway through the afternoon, I expect some individuals – and perhaps the entire battle – will call for a temporary cease-fire. ...And that is when I need a supply of food.”

“...So you don’t think you’re going to lose at the beginning?”

“If I thought I would lose, I would not take part in the first place. Good grief,” said Yoshiaki. “I will go all out from the very beginning. But unless I am knocked out early on or the entire battle concludes quickly, I need a way to safely reach the temporary cease-fire.”

Yoshiaki began walking in the middle of her statement.

And once she passed Yoshiyasu by...

“Hey! Where are you going!?”

“Yoshiyasu, where is your Righteousness?”

“I have the autopilot set to come to me if I call for it. Carrying it onto the battlefield would give away my position and its fuel consumption means it isn’t exactly suited for long-term use.”

“Being a god of war pilot does not seem to be worth the costs. ...Now, you said they were calling for us, didn’t you? Let’s go.”

“Wait!” Yoshiyasu ran after her. “Where’s your equipment!?”

“My fan is both a gun and a sword.”

“You’re planning to take them on using that? What about Onikiri?”

“Onikiri cuts my opponent’s dependents, but does not cut that opponent themselves. It is useless for a duel like this. Of course, whether or not I am actually taking it with me is something I wouldn’t tell even you.”

“You sure are crafty.”

“I am a fox after all. Besides...”

Yoshiaki gave a “ko ko” of laughter.

“On occasion, it is nice to show off the power of a Nine-Tails. Don’t you think?”

That question brought Yoshiyasu to a stop and Yoshiaki reached a hand out to her.

Yoshiaki rubbed the black hair on that short head and laughed in her throat again “Ko ko... I am glad you’re worried for me.”

“Of course I am.”

Yoshiyasu sounded exasperated as she walked out ahead of Yoshiaki.

Yoshiaki followed behind her with a light step.

Below the cloudy summer sky of late morning, Yoshiyasu looked back a few times to make sure Yoshiaki was still following.

“Let’s go. It’s this way. ...The Musashi group has already entered Odawara. If you’re right, we might be in trouble if we don’t hurry up and get ourselves some good spots.”

“...So the Siege of Odawara has begun.”

Noriki spoke quietly on the gravel-cleared shrine land surrounded by forest.

“Everyone is probably enjoying themselves.”

“How are you doing?”

“Judge,” said Noriki to a sign frame. The screen showed Hiro with the sky and a transport ship deck in the background. She looked sleepy. She had apparently spent the night loading and unloading cargo so they could leave after just the one night.

Noriki commented on her appearance.

“The engine division is always busy, isn’t it?”

“I appreciate that you didn’t apologize like it’s somehow your fault.”

“I’m familiar with the engine division’s schedule. I’ve seen how busy Naomasa and the others are.”

“Masa is really tough.”

Hiro said that with a smile, so Noriki smiled a little too.

“Do you like Naomasa?”

“I’m saying it isn’t normal to put together the Suzaku like she did. From what I heard, it barely needed any balancing or tuning by the time she came to the Musashi.”

“But it needed some, didn’t it?”

“...It was tuned for combat, so it had to be adjusted for work. That means she didn’t make any mistakes; it simply needed to be retuned for the Musashi. Although she’s apparently changed it back to the combat tuning recently.”

“You sound happy about that.”

“Well, yeah.”

Hiro smiled, but she did not elaborate.

She must have meant it went without saying.

“Trust based on skill is a good thing.”

With that, Noriki struck his left palm with his other fist.

A solid sound rang out and Suwa sign frames began opening around him.

<Suwa Shrine: 7th Sector: Requesting test strike> <Requestor: Noriki-sama from City Name “Musashi”: Thank you for using the Suwa Shrine> <Shrine Divine Protection: 30-Meter Square: Defense, Soundproofing, Recoil Suppression> “I don’t need the suppression. I don’t want any discrepancies from an actual battle.”

Noriki sent his voice back and to the right. At the edge of the dirt area of shrine ground, the shrine maiden standing on the stone pavement bowed and canceled that setting on her sign frame.

“You can begin preparations for your test strike whenever you are ready.”

“Judge,” replied Noriki while Hiro spoke from her sign frame.

“Is it ready?”

“The basic alteration I requested last night is ready. ...I suppose that’s the main shrine for you. Compared to the January I put together, it activates...”

He clenched his right fist.

Immediately, a long and narrow Suwa spell sign frame opened from his fist to his elbow.

But he opened his hand and canceled the spell before it fully opened.

He did not use it.

Twice more, he lightly struck empty air while only half-activating the spell.

He did not fully activate it, but the speed of his strikes grew.

“...faster.”

“How much faster?”

“Before, I had to activate it before pulling back my fist, but now I can wait until I send my fist forward.”

“What does that mean?”

“I can make more compact strikes and increase my attack speed. ...They said they placed an efficient mainframe on it instead of combining multiple spells...”

Noriki smiled bitterly at the sign frame describing the spell setting.

“But it’s got fairly bad fuel efficiency.”

The shrine maiden raised a sign frame from the edge of the area: **<Test Strike Preparations: Confirmed>**

Noriki nodded and raised his right hand. He signaled his understanding.

In response, there was a sound in the air. It came from the main Suwa Shrine a good distance away through the forest.

“Oh, something was just ejected,” said Hiro.

“I can see it,” said Noriki just before a boulder crashed into the ground 5 meters in front of him.

<Test Strike Target: Natural Stone: 12-Ton-Class: For Beginners: Confirmed>

“That was pretty incredible, but are you sure about this?” asked Hiro.

“It’s for fine-tuning the spell. Don’t worry about it. ...I’ve asked for another 9.”

“That wasn’t what I meant. ...Oh, the order just arrived.”

“The order?”

“The order of battles at Odawara. I’ll send it your way.”

“Judge,” nodded Noriki as it was displayed.

It listed the participants by nation:

- **Houjou: Ujinao, Ujiteru, Genan, Kotarou, Yoshiaki**
- **Musashi: 3 people**
- **Mogami: Yoshiaki, Yoshiyasu**
- **Hashiba: Kani**
- **Uesugi: Honjou, 1 other**

- **Takigawa: Takigawa, 3 from Sanada**
- **Date: Narumi**
- **Mouri: Seki, Reine des Garous**

“Some of them haven’t been named yet,” commented Noriki. “It’s mostly ours, though.”

“They said there was no obligation to announce it before the battle begins, so they want to hold back until the last second.”

“When does it start?”

“One o’clock. ...Oh, and that’s now.”

The kanji clock in the right corner of the sign frame said it was one in the afternoon.

The order written on the sign frame was automatically rewritten. It now included the previously unspecified names.

“Honestly.” Noriki spread his mouth horizontally. “This was Neshinbara’s idea, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, I can sort of tell that kind of thing these days too...”

Noriki took Hiro’s comment to mean he was not obligated to explain. He sighed, struck his fists together, and faced the stone in front of him.

“I’ll finish this up soon enough. ...When are we headed back?”

“It’s a descent so about 6 hours. 4 hours at the fastest, maybe? ...But what will you do once you get there?”

“Judge.” Noriki nodded, took his attack stance, and steadied his breathing. “Go save my old home.”

The Siege of Odawara was cloudy.

Below the blowing wind and dull light of the cloudy sky, battlefields developed at a water source, at a castle, and at a city.

They were duel battlefields.

At precisely 13:00, the Siege of Odawara began and the participating nations observed the first battle begin at 13:07.

That beginning was signaled by explosive destruction in the center of the city.

Chapter 44: Runner at the Start Time

第四十四章

『初期時間の駆け人』



ちょっと待て
大分待て
もっと待て
配点（無・理）

Wait a little

Wait a lot

Wait more

Point Allocation (Not – Possible)

Katou Yoshiaki heard a certain sound.

An explosive boom reached her from far beyond the roofs of the buildings.

...Has the battle started?

This got bloody fast, she thought, but she was a part of it.

As a Weiss Hexen, she normally fought in the sky, so she was not exactly in her element fighting on the surface.

But, she thought. I know how to fight like this.

That just left using it in an emergency, but...

“I hope I can meet up with Kani.”

She had been sent in on Houjou’s side. Houjou and Hashiba were enemies, but as long as they each had another enemy, they would not be forced to fight each other.

Kani’s skill level was unknown, but ground battles had to be her forte. Yoshiaki had not expected her to run all the way to Shimoda in half a day. According to Kani...

“But the mountains are really scary at night!”

That was the line of someone who had experienced the mountains at night.

So Yoshiaki concluded that Kani was fairly capable. However...

“———”

Now, what to do? she thought.

“I want to avoid getting into any serious fights if I can.”

Yoshiaki thought about the battlefield and the battle participants.

Based on the order, she was the only one that could fly. So she could always take flight and flee as soon as a battle began.

There were plenty of obstacles and plenty of cover in the city. Her wings made her easy to see, but she still had an advantage since she could retreat and escape. Also...

...Could I also hide inside a home or store?

But there were figures in the city.

They were automatons.

Perhaps as a service from Houjou, automatons in Houjou maid uniforms were cleaning the roads and running some of the stores and restaurants. They would clean up the damaged battlefield and they would provide assistance if anyone needed it.

Of course, they did not greet or speak to anyone so they would not give away anyone's position.

The participants were treated like they did not exist.

There was another explosion. It was farther away than before.

...In that case...

This was dangerous.

The representatives would move away from the site of a battle in progress. They would not want it to interfere with their own battles. But in that case...

"Where am I now?"

She was on the southwest side of the Odawara city. She was near the corner.

She had nowhere to run if she was pursued.

She needed to get moving and soon. An enemy could be approaching from the center, so she always kept a building between her and the roads leading to the center.

She hurried.

She wanted to remain as passive as possible. So she avoided an automaton cleaning the road, and...

“...Outta the way.”

“Oh, excuse me.”

Hearing that, Yoshiaki tapped the automaton on the shoulder and hurried on. She kept her pace light, but she also used her wings.

“—————”

She used some horizontal acceleration to quickly leave that place.

“I was careless,” said Yoshiaki. “I can’t believe they got so close.”

Seki watched the wind leave.

She placed her right hand on the shoulder Yoshiaki had tapped.

“I thought about ending that quickly with a surprise attack, but it didn’t work out.”

She held a black knife in the hand on her shoulder.

She looked back to see no sign of Yoshiaki, not even some scattered feathers.

That girl had made an excellent escape.

And she had done so after tapping Seki on the shoulder to tell her she had noticed her. Seki had immediately prepared for battle when she realized she had been noticed.

Yoshiaki had used that opening to escape, but...

...I should count myself lucky that I did not have to fight with my surprise attack equipment.

Staying positive is for the best, concluded Seki. And...

“Okay, let’s get going.”

Houjou maid uniforms could be quickly removed using the shoulder clasps.

She wore her normal clothing below: a Hexagone Française combat maid

uniform. She straightened the collar, rewrapped the scarf, and checked the armor.

“Testament.”

Then she opened the lid to a nearby water bucket.

It contained a pallet of rifles, pistols, and swords.

She lifted it with her gravitational control and then looked up.

She had heard a noise.

This explosion was even more distant than the last and she noted something about that roar of air.

“That is not an attack. ...They are pursuing someone as a game.”

Ookubo ran through the city.

It had been a long time since she set foot on the ground. The surface was more humid than the Musashi and she saw a thick layer of shimmering heat in the distance.

...Yes, the surface is such an elegant place. No weird upperclassmen anywhere.

“...Wait, this is no time to let that soothe me!”

Just as she shouted that, there was an explosive blast behind her.

A flame spell consumed several homes in an instant. This was more than just a fire spell, as it apparently had an explosion spell included as well. The rumbling produced a shockwave that sent the fragments of broken buildings shooting through the city at high speed. They literally pierced through other buildings to attack at unexpected places.

And once again...

“Wah.”

The building behind her to the right was apparently an inn. A Far Eastern wall with a terrace on the second floor was smashed through on the second floor. The building itself had not been destroyed. The fragments of the house

destroyed in the explosion had collided with a building in the adjacent block.

It was a column that broke through the inn's second floor wall and flew her way. The column was burned to charcoal in places and it carried fragments of the plaster wall with it.

They flew by overhead, but then they lost speed.

"...!"

Ookubo sped up to escape the pillar that fell down toward her like it was trying to hit her.

She avoided it.

Behind her, the pillar crashed into the ground with a surprisingly light sound. She feared it would slide along the dirt and she did indeed hear it rolling with a hollow sound.

But the burnt plaster fragments and clumps of dirt were raining down from above.

Ookubo was familiar with the effects of explosions and how much damage they could do. She had learned that all too well on the way to England. But...

"Shit!"

She swore, but that felt like the only appropriate word.

"Curse those upperclassmen! Curse them...!"

Just saying it isn't enough. I have to do something about it once I get back. Yes, that's what I'll do. I feel like I'm violating a law against casting unauthorized curses, but I can have Kanou-kun do something about that.

Besides, thought Ookubo.

...I did think this sounded like a good idea...

Ookubo recalled what happened the night before.

When she visited the cleanup after the meeting, the Vice President had handed her a Main Blue Thunder tart in a box.

“Oh, Ookubo. Take this home with you. The idiot made them while crossdressing, but they’re pretty good. And don’t worry about tomorrow. We have the rules already and you can negotiate on the battlefield. Take a look.”

Battlefield Rules

- **Each duel is limited to 30 minutes and a draw will not be counted as a victory.**
- **If there is a disagreement in the desired type of duel, a discussion will be held and each type will be used for 15 minutes.**
- **If the winner or loser are deemed fit to continue fighting, they may move to a different battlefield.**
- **After a duel is complete, the participants must wait an hour before fighting again.**
- **Divine transmissions on the battlefield will generally be restricted to those being sent out. Mutual communication can only be done at predetermined times or while the warrior is unable to fight.**

“See? We’ve all settled on accepting negotiation, so you relax and prepare for that. The other nations will follow along with that. ...Oh, there’s a tea pack too. Eat and drink these and get some sleep. Okay?”

“Maa.”

She had left when the anteater waved goodbye, but she should have protested on the spot.

After all, there was a flaw in those battlefield rules.

...You can choose negotiation as your duel type, but there’s nothing you can do if your opponent has no intention of negotiating.

Or to sum it up...

“It’s useless against a crazy person.”

That was what happened to her.

Just in case, she had written “Requesting a Negotiation” on a sign frame and held it over her head.

She had chosen the center of the city for her battlefield.

Everyone would have their own ideas, but she had decided no one would be dumb enough to start fighting in the very middle. After all, that would make you stand out and the battle would be visible from all four directions.

In the center, something more inconspicuous – like a negotiation – would be preferable to a flashy battle.

So Ookubo had decided to head to the center of the city, raise her negotiation sign, and wait for an opponent.

And that was what she had done.

There was a plaza in the center of the city. It was a dirt plaza with a well in the center. She figured her negotiation sign would be quite visible from there. With everyone watching, no one would be stupid enough to ignore her request for negotiation and attack instead.

And just as she had left the streets and entered the plaza, someone had run out from behind a house.

It was a maid automaton. It was Houjou Ujiteru.

Houjou was an important opponent for Musashi. They would join Musashi later and their permission was needed to enter the Houjou ruins the Vice President and others wanted to visit. So...

“Negotiate! I wish to duel via negotiation!”



北条・氏照

Just as she yelled that, Ujiteru hid his face behind his hands. Then he swung his arms around in a large circle to reveal his automaton face and stuck out his tongue.

“Baaaaaaaahhhhhhh! It’s meeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!”

And who are you? Oh, right. Houjou Ujiteru.

“Hiiiiiii! Little giiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiirl! Let me show you the wayyyyyyyyyyyyyy!”

That led to her current predicament.

“Shit!”

She heard another explosion behind her. And...

“Helloooooooo! Where are yooooooooou!? Come on ouuuuuuuut! Or are you happy where you arrre!? That’s terrific! Just like meeeeeee! I’m Uji-terrific...!”

The lunatic’s voice pursued her below the summer sun.

Uncle seems to be doing well, thought Ujinao.

Ujinao sighed in the center of Odawara Castle’s center citadel.

She sat below a bamboo parasol. The tea prepared by the automatons was on the hot side, but...

“Even with an automaton body, it feels wonderful to work up a sweat and then cool off.”

“Testament,” agreed the automatons before stepping back.

She viewed a sign frame map of the battlefield.

The water source, Odawara Castle, and the city. Knowing everyone’s location was her privilege as the manager of the Siege of Odawara.

She spoke to the individual on the way to the castle’s main gate.

“Kotarou, do not push yourself too hard.”

“You say that, but I don’t have much of a choice with these opponents!”

“That is why I am warning you.”

Ujinao smiled and saw a few movements.

Musashi's main group was at the hill near the water source. Takigawa wanted a group battle, so if that was to be viewed as a duel, it was a unique one. The three from Sanada were there too, but how was that going to turn out?

There was one thing she had told Musashi.

She had sent a single divine transmission to them while they were considering their lineup before the battle.

As a result, she could see two people in the Musashi group headed to the water source.

"The Vice President and Chancellor are with them..."

That was a good decision. After all...

"The Houjou ruins are at that same water source as Takigawa's group."

Masazumi stood before a hill.

The artificial lake where Takigawa awaited was naturally at a higher elevation than Odawara Castle.

The artificial lake was surrounded by a forest, so it looked easy to approach it using that as cover. However...

"...Sanada and Takigawa are ninjas, so the forest is dangerous."

"We should take the lead."

She could only agree with Neshinbara and Crossunite's comments.

Due to the cloudy forest and hill, she could not yet see the lake.

"Are the ruins there?"

"Houjou says so. ...And I can understand why there would be ruins at that water source. In order to use the ocean for trade, the newer parts of the city were likely built in the lower area."

"So what are we gonna do, Seijun? Go check it out now?"

"We don't have the right yet." Masazumi looked to Odawara Castle and the

city where she could see and hear explosions. “We need someone to defeat someone from Houjou so we can win that right. And political factors could change the other nations’ stance. It would be safest not to head there right away. So for now...”

She looked to the explosive Odawara city.

“We wait until someone has won a victory over Houjou.”

“And if no one does?”

“We ask some other nation or Houjou to give us one victory’s worth of rights. This might call for a prostration.”

She heard another explosion in the distance. However...

“Mh?” Urquiaga turned toward the Odawara city. “The direction of the explosions has changed. Has something happened on the battlefield?”

Ookubo realized the pursuing explosions had suddenly veered away.

...To the right!?

They had shifted, but she could not let her guard down. This could always be a feint.

“Kh...”

Ookubo ran. She raced forward while telling herself she could relax if the explosions did not return after another 3 seconds of running.

Three.

There was another explosion behind her. Its position was still shifted.

But she ran. There was a three-way junction coming up and she wanted to turn right or left at it.

Two.

She accelerated her legs to hurry up.

Oh, whoops. I haven’t activated enough cooling spells. I only have the usual two for keeping away the summer heat.

One.

She approached the three-way junction and the explosion was shifted again.

Good, she thought. The enemy lunatic really has given up on me. He must have spotted someone else when he lost sight of me. So...

“Zero...!”

After turning right at the three-way junction and moving behind a house, she took a breath.

She was safe.

That series of events had been far too much.

Why did a liberal arts type have to be chased around by an athletic...no, insane automaton?

“I’m protesting this once I get back...”

With that comment, Ookubo released a heated breath toward the ground and straightened up.

There was a mechanical phoenix in front of her.

It was gold and red, it was at least 15m tall, and its head was facing her.

“...Eh?”

What is this doing here? she wondered as light entered the sight devices on its face. They moved like eyes to focus on her.

“Ohh, ohh. You are a Musashi child...I think? Well, it does not matter. I am Houjou Genan. I have come here as Houjou Ujikuni. Oh, and this is my prototype. It is a mechanical phoenix specialized for ground battles.”

“—————”

Hold on, thought Ookubo as she bent backwards.

...First a lunatic and now a mechanical phoenix? What kind of theme park is this...!?

The mechanical phoenix stood up with a “yo” and a sound like spraying metal came from its entire body.

“I am merely opening up my cannons a bit, but don’t worry. ...I know how to do it so it won’t hurt. Now...which one would you like?”

Without even answering, Ookubo dashed back the way she had come.

Raging destruction was added to the city.

Houses were scattered into the air, but what exactly was racing through the Odawara city could not be seen past the roofs and destruction.

However, a voice spoke up from a position overlooking that wave of destruction.

Two figures faced each other on the shopping district roofs of north Odawara.

One was a white-skinned woman standing on a water bucket.

“Sviet Rus Representative Honjou Shigenaga.”

Her opponent stood on a bathhouse roof with arms crossed.

“Houjou Ujiteruuuuuuu!”

With his arms still crossed, he spread out some swords in his hands. There were three in each hand. He held the blades between his fingers and flames burst from them to extend their reach.

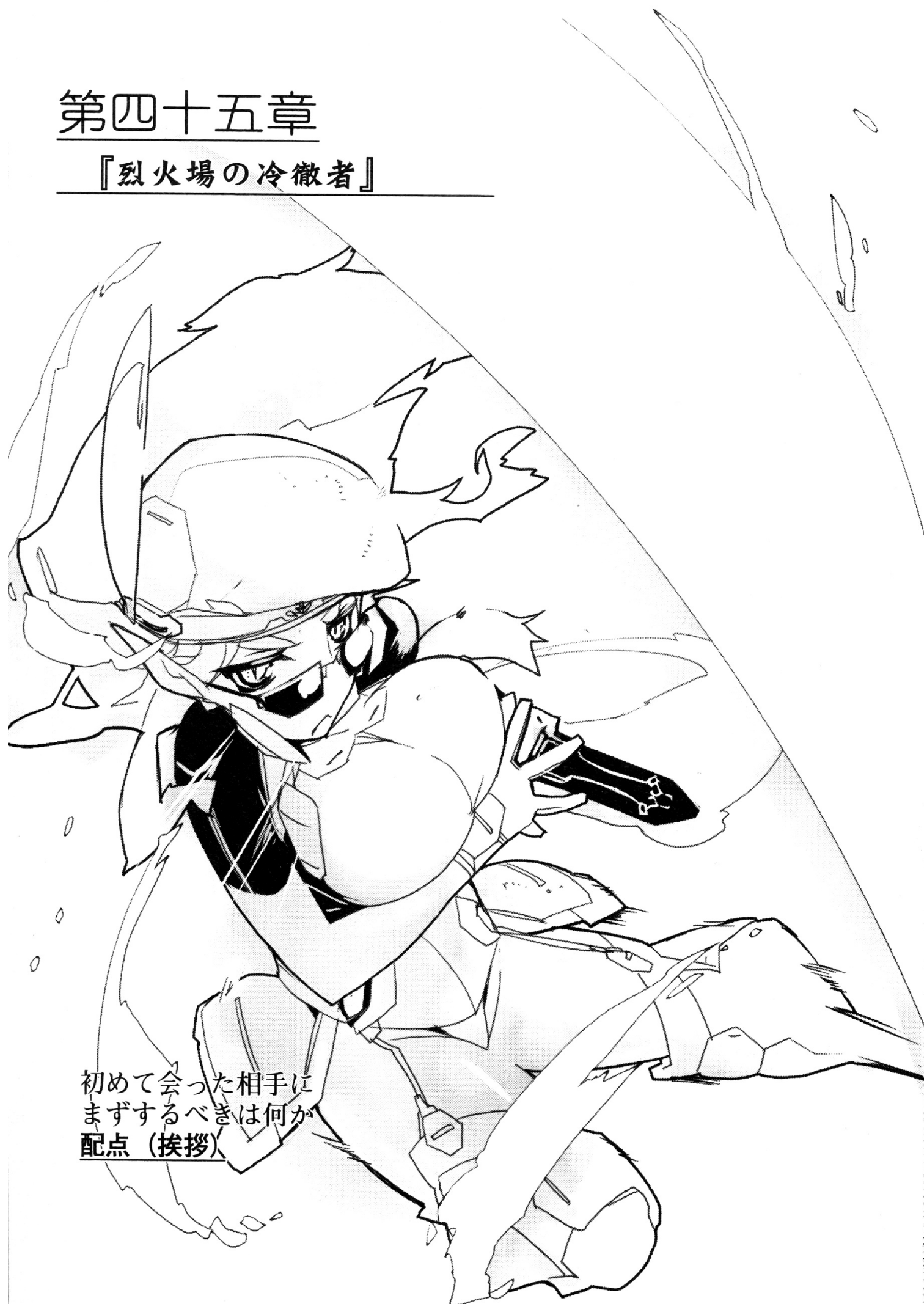
“You think too much of yourself, little girl...!”

The water bucket foothold exploded when the fire touched it.

Chapter 45: Cool Head in the Conflagration

第四十五章

『烈火場の冷徹者』



初めて会った相手に
まずするべきは何か
配点（挨拶）

What should you do first

Upon meeting a new opponent?

Point Allocation (Greeting)

Shigenaga dueled against a series of fiery slashes.

They came from Houjou Ujiteru.

His body was that of an automaton and his weapon was...

“...Swords with explosion conductivity!?”

“Ding ding diiiiiiiiiiiing! But also buzz buzzzzzzzz! Together that would be dingbuzz dingbuzz diiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiing! In other words, you’re half wrong! Wanna know the answeerrrrr!? These aren’t katanaaas! They’re sworrds! Wait, the other way arouund! I got it wronnnnnnnng! They’re katanaaaaaaas!”

Shigenaga was irritated by this opponent who twisted his head nearly upside down.

But Ujiteru’s actions were solid. He swung his head back and forth and swung his body left and right like a dog as he rushed at her, but there was no disturbance at all in the movement of the swords in his hands.

He was an expert.

She could not approach him carelessly.

But he was an opponent Shigenaga wanted to take out.

...A victory against Houjou would be valuable.

For Sviet Rus, Houjou’s land was past P.A. Oda to the south. Sanada was also in the middle and it was not contiguous, so it would normally not be very attractive land.

But Musashi would be leading the construction of a trade route. Once that happened, southern land for agriculture, fishing, and trade would be very valuable.

Also, Musashi wanted a victory over Houjou. Sviet Rus could view this as the

Punishment of Aizu while also providing Musashi with the victory over Houjou they desired.

...So this battle should be valuable.

Shigenaga lowered her hips in a combat stance.

Ujiteru responded by sticking out his tongue and swinging his body forward.

“Ohhhhhhhh! Yoooooou ready to goooooooooo!?”

She pulled a portable cannon from her skirt and fired it at him.

That did it, thought Shigenaga.

But she was wrong.

The destruction did not hit Ujiteru. The metal bullet she had launched exploded when it hit the end of the road far behind him.

He had dodged it.

It had been an instantaneous movement. Ujiteru had seen her cannon attack coming and bent his body to the side.

The main entrance of the house far past him was left splintered and smoking.

Meanwhile, he briefly glanced back that way.

“That was clooooooooooose! What do you think you’re doing, womaaaaaaaaaaaan!? Do you hate meeeeeeeeeeeeeee!?”

“Does anyone like you?”

“I doooooooooooooooooooooo! It’s called self-loooooooooove! Too baaaaaaaaaaaaaad! How about a trip to Hachioji as a consolation priiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiize!? Wanna try falling down a waterfall?! Wellll!?”

He irritated her, so she decided to fire a second shot.

She took her firing stance.

A moment later, the colors black and white spread out in front of her eyes.

It was Ujiteru.

He had closed the gap between them in an instant. That may have been due to his abilities as an automaton, but...

...There was no disturbance in his movements...!

He had moved smoothly without any vertical shaking. It was almost like he had slid forward from his previous position.

And he swung his flame swords in a motion that ignored his automaton joints.

“————”

Flames fell from the upper right. Shigenaga swung her body right to dodge the attack from Ujiteru's left hand.

She targeted his wide-open left side by swinging her left fist toward it. That fist held the thick short sword that had been in her waist hard point. It was an extreme-close range *yoroi-dooshi* made of black steel.

She could use that to slice through demon armor like it was a cutting torch, so it could instantly cut through an automaton's body and wires.

Just as Shigenaga knew she had his left side, a blade flew out from between his vertically swinging left arm and his chest.

He had made a sideways jab with the flame swords in his right hand after extinguishing their fire.

His right arm moved as if to embrace her chest from the left.

It was a forceful action, but she read more into what he was doing and gasped.

...What kind of timing is that!?

He had yet to finish the swing of his left flame swords. But to make such an accurate jab with the right ones meant he had already begun making that right attack when he made the left one.

That was before she had made her move.

“Kh...”

He had extinguished the flames so as not to burn his own body.

She knew even he had only just barely been able to pull this off.

But she successfully intercepted it. She raised her thick blade and took a defensive stance.

She had placed her right foot to the right, but now she sent that heel ahead and to the right while also kicking her left leg to the right. She avoided the next sword slash to the right. Or she intended to.

A moment later, triple sparks scattered from an impact.

Her black steel short sword had blocked the three jabbing blades in Ujiteru's right hand.

Catching the backs of the blades on her upper arm paid off. She blocked the impact with her elbow and lightly stepped to the right.

Or she should have.

...This weight...!?

Ujiteru had made a curving jab past the front of his body, but its strength was not what mattered. It had numbed her elbow and provided a weight that affected the right step meant to soften the impact.

What she meant as a light step had her slide half her body-width across the dirt ground.

In an instant, the grip of her shoe's soles loosened, but...

"Ohh...!"

She had demon blood in her veins, so she could produce physical strength several times that of a human.

So instead of using her light weight, she worked to stop her momentum. She ended the knockback slide and then rapidly circled behind Ujiteru.

The automaton had his right arm across the front of his body and he was swinging his left arm down over the right one. Whether he corrected his stance or turned around, he needed to make a preparatory action before actually beginning his attack.

But Shigenaga only had to make a backhand strike on his back with her left

blade.

So she did so.

After circling behind him, she moved toward him and sent out her left short sword.

Just then, she saw something: eyes.

Ujiteru's face had turned 180 degrees to follow her. His eyes were bugging out, his tongue was sticking out, he looked down at her, and...

"Tooooooooo baaaaaaaaaad!"

At the same time, he moved. But not to dodge or to attack. He swung his back toward her.

...Oh, no...!

He sent his own back into her black steel blade.

The short sword stabbed into the automaton's back almost up to the guard.

But it was not a deep wound. The tactile feedback that reached her left hand felt like the blade had caught in something.

Ujiteru had captured the blade between his automaton body joints.

She had to make a split second decision.

Would she pull it out, or would she swing the short sword upwards despite the risk of it breaking?

She chose...

"...This is a dangerous choice!!"

She abandoned the blade and launched herself back to his left side.

A moment later, Ujiteru sent an attack to the spot she had just vacated.

It was his left arm.

He had swung that arm forward, but he had forcibly swung it around to the back.

He had removed the restrictions of his left shoulder joint, and...

...Did he use his right arm?

When he swung his right arm toward her earlier, it had ended up below his downwards-swinging left arm. He had forcibly lifted that right arm to push his left arm back up like a whip.

Also...

...Here it comes...!

His face was looking at her. His head spun vertically like it was rolling on his shoulder, so now it faced her while upside down.

And as soon as he realized his left arm would not capture its target, he made his next move.

His right arm was already moving upwards, but now he rotated it around to the outside. And...

“Spiiiiiiiinny spiiiiiiiiin spiiiiiiiiiiiiin!!”

He spun to the right on his right leg.

He relaxed his left arm to swing it around from his shoulder. Also...

"Burrurrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrn! My manly paaaaaaaaaassion!"

His flame slashes began rotating. He used both arms and he released the shoulder and elbow joints.

“Extend, exteeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeend!”

The flame swords raised their output at the end of their 4m radius reach.

The explosion that erupted in the Odawara city was on a far greater scale than before.

“Oh?”

Yoshiaki held a skewer of dumplings in front of a café in the northeast of the city.

“The explosions are spreading. ...I get the feeling whoever-it-is is throwing them into their surroundings. Should I assume this gives the attacker the

advantage...?”

The city was shaken by the rumbling sound and the blowing wind.

Yoshiaki spoke while letting that wind wash over her and eating the dumplings.

“Even the windswept fields are calm in my Ushuu. We could start now, but how about we have a cup of tea first? ...Well?”

She called to the person standing on the road in front of her.

“What do you say, Kani Saizou?”

“Yes! I will have some tea!”

“Good, good.”

Yoshiaki patted on the bench next to her, so Kani hopped over to sit there and shouted to the shop behind her.

“Excuse me! Please give me some zenzai! Two servings with mochi in them!”

“Oh? I see you have an appetite.”

“Yes!” Kani nodded. “Eating helps you grow! And I want to be even taller!”

“Oh? What about your chest?”

“That can wait until I’m tall!”

That is something I wish Yoshiyasu could hear, thought Yoshiaki while sipping at her tea.

The explosive wind was still blowing in from the distance. That battlefield only continued to accelerate.

“Hiiiiiiii! Helloooooooooooooo!”

After burning away everything within a radius of more than 10 meters and blowing away everything in a radius twice as long, there was nothing but rubble left of the city there. Buildings were ultimately just a collection of boards and columns and those could not withstand the explosive blasts and powerful gusts of wind.

The attack only left behind collapsed wall materials, broken pillars, light objects like buckets, and collections of objects like drawers.

At first glance, it looked like all of the city's structures had been hit by a giant wave.

At the center, Ujiteru spun his body around and swung two sets of three flames for a total of six.

His opponent was Shigenaga.

She generally focused on dodging while he sent a series of high-speed slashes against her.

They were not simply slashes. Not only could he move his arms' joints at unnatural angles, but he could switch between the front and back of his body or even spin his hip joint all the way around.

"Hold stillllllllllll! Yesssss! Is your stabby meal cooked to your likiiiiiiiiiiiiing!?"

"I don't want one, you fool...!" said Shigenaga. "It's time you were blown away!"

She put some distance between them and fired the portable cannon attached to her right hip.

She immediately stuck the next round in the barrel and rotated the cannon to load it. After all, she had predicted the path of Ujiteru's attack and had to leave her stance to dodge it.

And after she dodged him...

"Th-that was clooooooose! Weren't you taught never to aim at another perrrrrrrrrrson!?"

"You're one to talk!!"

He sent a fire slash at her while they spoke.

Those spell katanas would detonate even the dust in the air on contact.

"This guy is such a pain...!"

With that, Shigenaga moved forward. In the widened city street, she passed between wreckage and used it as cover while charging toward Ujiteru.

Shigenaga made her move.

She ran forward.

Ujiteru responded with a casual strike of his right arm.

It was a somewhat diagonal strike, but she could not focus too much on that. He could change the trajectory of his swords midflight.

It was better to think of it like homing projectiles.

And the beginning of that motion was his vision. The unrestricted joints of an automaton allowed him to change the trajectory of his swinging arms, but it was even more of a problem with his head.

No matter how she moved, she was doing it further out and away from him. That meant her speed could never match that of him turning his head at the center.

...And that allows him to follow me with his gaze while he attacks!

Since he followed her with his eyes, attacked, and then followed her again, she had to be constantly on the move. And since his flame swords caused explosions, he also had to stay on the move. So first of all...

“Honjou Shield...!”

Shigenaga used a spell to produce an ether shield from her left palm and sent it toward Ujiteru.

The shield was literally launched toward him for a shield bash.

She targeted his right arm so it would hit the flame swords. But...

“Bzzzzzzzzzzzz! You miiiiiiiiiiissed!”

He released the elbow joint of his right arm during the slash, so the arm bent around the outside of the Honjou Shield.

And immediately after dodging it, he reset his elbow joint to normal. Also...

“How about anotherrrrrrrrrrr!?”

He also sent out a slash with his left arm.

...Kh!

He was too fast.

And his attacks would not hit the ground.

He used his great speed to rotate the flame swords, but he would pull them back before they hit the ground and begin his next rotation.

It was a forceful series of slashes and pushes. That was Ujiteru's sword technique.

Since it was based on forceful action, it was powerful.

Shigenaga, however, had not fallen back. She used Honjou Shield.

"Ohh...!"

After dodging his attack, she sent out the shield to fight back.

The shattered shields exploded and the dodged slashes roasted the air.

A high-speed exchange of roars and flames was held below the cloudy summer sky.

Within that, Shigenaga heard laughter. Ujiteru was laughing as his tongue shook and his throat rumbled.

"Excellent...!"

"What is!?"

"That so many people like you are gathered here todayyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!!"

She did not reply with "so what".

This enemy wanted to fight all of those people.

...Is he a battle-crazed warrior...!?

When referring to Houjou Ujiteru, the term "battle-crazed" formed a certain baseline. He was not truly looking at her anymore.

He thought of her as a waypoint.

That fact created a heat in her chest.

"Don't underestimate me, you doll-bound vengeful spirit!!"

She would stop him. Sviet Rus would stop this madman here.

The rights no longer mattered to her. Houjou Ujiteru had turned *her* into a mere waypoint.

As one of the leaders of Sviet Rus, that was...

“Unforgivable!”

Shigenaga swung her body to the left to dodge the slash Ujiteru sent down from the right.

She stood in front of him, but his slash would immediately pursue her. And it would do so by hopping back up from extremely low to the ground.

So she hurriedly took two actions.

She fired her right portable cannon to the bottom right while sending a Honjou Shield toward him.

The right cannon blast was crucial. Because...

“Hit...!”

His flame swords arrived from the bottom right. A moment later, they would hop up to cut her down.

She was prepared for it to be a lethal attack.

And after the slash, the flames produced by those swords would reside within their target and trigger an explosion. The fire she saw came from the explosion spell and was something like a fuse.

So there was a time lag from the slash to the explosion.

That prevented the flame swords from damaging themselves or injuring their wielder.

But what if she fired her cannon at the blades in advance?

The flames would reside within the hit to the slash, but the impact would be unable to leave the blade.

...So it'll explode!

With the force of the cannon blast included, she guessed it would destroy Ujiteru's left arm along with the flame swords.

Her bullet hit as planned.

It happened instantly and Shigenaga gathered strength in the left arm swinging her Honjou Shield.

A moment later, the flame swords would shatter and an explosion would erupt.

But she had demon blood in her veins. Her biological divine protections could endure a small-scale blast at close range.

So she relied on that. And...

"Diiiiiiiiiiiiid you try somethiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiing!?"

Ujiteru's upside-down face approached as if ducking below the Honjou Shield.

...Huh!?

Her confusion was not directed at Ujiteru.

It was directed to the bottom right where she had fired her cannon.

The bullet should have collided with the flame swords.

And she could see that had definitely happened.

Except the blades were not producing fire.

Three flame swords were abandoned on the ground. At the moment of impact, Ujiteru had extinguished the fire and let go of them.

The bullet had knocked the three swords to the dirt.

"———!"

And just as they shattered...

"Toooooooooo baaaaaaaaaaaaad! One morrrrrre!"

Ujiteru sent out a flame slash using the three swords in his right hand.

Shigenaga did not have the proper timing or stance to dodge.

...I was careless...!

That thought sank into the pit of her stomach and she moved.

Ujiteru thought he had sliced through his opponent.

But he felt no tactile feedback from the three right flame blades. And...

“Hmmmmm!? Hmm!?”

He shook his head a few times in a trembling motion.

As his right arm moved up and down to tilt his head, he found his clothing was disturbed at that arm and its shoulder.

His maid uniform's apron was torn and the right half of his face was covered with scorch marks.

That was proof of an explosion going off at close range.

“Wait, waaaaaaaaaaaaait! What is thiiiiis!? Where's the enemy!? Well!?”

He shouted out into the city where the rubble moved a little.

Shigenaga slowly stood up after having been blown away and embedded in a collapsed house.

Shigenaga stood up.

She breathed heavily and faced Ujiteru from a distance of 12 meters.

She looked forward.

But her knees were shaking.

“Heyyyyyy! Is your consciousness blinking in and out therrrrrrrrrrrrre?”

The impact had given her a light concussion.

But it was not a lethal injury. And...

“That's cause of that shieeeeeeeeeeld!”

The Honjou Shield.

She had tried to send the left shield toward Ujiteru, but she had thrown it to the left in the instant she realized he had abandoned his left flame swords.

She had predicted that he was already swinging his right arm down.

As a result, that shield was hit by the flame sword slash, but...

“I’ve been cooked well dooooooone! I smell tastyyyyyy!”

When the Honjou Shield exploded between the two of them, it had sent her flying before the slash could reach her.

That was why she still lived.

Her only injuries were from being thrown backwards by the explosive blast.

The same was true for Ujiteru. But there was a difference between Ujiteru’s automaton frame and Shigenaga’s demon physiology: the protection of their brain.

Ujiteru had not taken a blow to his brain and he could immediately continue fighting. Shigenaga, on the other hand...

“—————”

She had stood up on instinct, but she could not move. She was gradually coming to, but she still could not move.

And Ujiteru did not hold back. Even as he spoke, he inspected different parts of his body.

“Oooooone, twoooooooooo! Threeeeeee, fourrrrrrrrrrrr!”

He jumped and ran toward Shigenaga. And in his emptied left hand...

“Jackpooooooooot! Three morrrrrrrre!!”

He now swung three new flame swords there.

Shigenaga did not really understand her situation.

She felt some kind of intense anger and she remembered she had been fighting.

But when she tried to remember what she had to do and think about now...

...Kh.

It felt like there was a fog in her mind. Her thoughts were wrapped in a white emptiness.

...*Why is that?*

It was all such a pain. Thinking only gave her a headache.

Something black and white was rushing toward her with long hands raised.

This is bad, she thought, but she did not understand what it was or why it was bad.

But she knew it was bad.

Yet her mind was simply blank. So...

“— — — —”

Her mind wanted something she did not have to think about.

She saw the sky. It was cloudy and dull, just like her mind at the moment.

There was a city below the sky and the area around her was badly destroyed.

And just then...

...*Eh?*

She saw a color beyond the flowing clouds.

It was blue. The color of the sky.

Ohh, she thought. *Has spring arrived?*

Clouds covered the sky throughout winter in Sviet Rus. The clearing of the clouds was a sign of spring and the spring lightning was guaranteed to follow.

And follow it did.

“Shigenaga-kun. ...You have yet to report back on your situation.”

It was Ivan the Terrible, wielder of lightning.

This was a divine transmission from Sviet Rus. And that strongest demon clearly spoke to her.

“Surely you are not sleeping. It is past noon, but I will say this just in case.”

She could imagine the smile on his face.

“*Zdravstvuyte*. Good morning, Shigenaga-kun.”

“———!!”

Her mind woke up.

Yes. This was a *privet*.

It was a clash with an enemy. In Sviet Rus, that combat ritual was an exchange.

So below the cloudy sky, Shigenaga awoke to the charging enemy.

This was her specialty. This was Sviet Rus’s specialty.

It was a head-on battle. She had won countless of these and been blown away by countless of them. So she had a technique for it. That being...

“Honjou Shield...!”

She forcibly gathered strength in her hands and opened several of them.

There were 16 in all. She arranged the ether shields in a fan shape before her. And...

“...!!”

The shields flew out, blowing away the rubble as they went. The wreckage of nearby houses and other buildings was blown and rolled away and the ether shields burst out.

But something took evasive action directly ahead.

It was Ujiteru. He swung his entire body around as he charged in.

“Waaaaaaaakey waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaakey!”

The automaton sharply bent his legs to clear the flying shields and accelerated toward her. The two sets of flame swords flapped like wings and his racing feet galloped like a horse.

Meanwhile, Shigenaga had moved forward while the Honjou Shields were still flying.

And she launched a second wave of 16 shields.

“Go...!”

She launched them at Ujiteru’s waist height.

But it only took the enemy an instant to dodge them. He rearranged his body’s frame as he ran and dodged the close-range attack by shifting a portion of his torso to the side.

He was closing in on her, but Shigenaga moved forward as well.

And...

“Ohh...!”

She clenched her teeth and launched another 16.

She aimed for his face, but not to hit him. To blind him.

However...

“Bahhhhh! I’m down herrrrrrre!”

Ujiteru lowered his face.

He released his neck joint, literally bent his body forward, and placed his head below the Honjou Shields.

His attack had already begun. He swung his right arm to send the flame swords’ fire straight down through her left shoulder.

At the same time, Shigenaga swung her right arm. She held a portable cannon in her right hand.

“There...!”

She fired on empty space. But she scored a direct hit on something: Ujiteru’s left arm.

That was a second attack he was trying to make. She had predicted it and fired there.

In that instant, he released his left elbow joint. With an obvious light noise, his arm bent sharply.

It dodged the bullet.

Shigenaga had no weapon.

So the enemy spoke.

“Time to punish the sleepy heeeeeeeeeeeead!”

Meanwhile, Shigenaga took a light step. Instead of focusing on weight like before, she took a stance that focused on speed.

“Allow me to teach you about the *privet*.”

“I know that! I know thaaaaaaaat!” roared Ujiteru as he made a deep swing of his left flame swords to raise them once more.

“Zdravstvvuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuyte!”

“Precisely.”

Shigenaga lowered her body.

A moment later, a certain power produced destruction.

It was the cannon blast she had fired. It had missed his arm and continued behind him where it shattered a light.

One of the Honjou Shields she had sent out earlier had yet to fully disperse when the bullet split it.

“—————”

The light shattered.

Ujiteru turned just his head to view it.

He saw light.

He had magnificently dodged the shot fired by the demon woman in front of him, and yet...

...Huhhhhh!?

Blue shards of ether scattered, but they flew out forcefully.

“Zdravstvuyte.”

The light ignited as soon as the woman said that.

The shield fragments had come in contact with his flame swords' fire.

The rest was simple.

The fire raced to the other shields flying through the air.

It only took a short time for the ignition to become detonation.

Ujiteru gave a shout.

“Take better care of your surroundiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiings!”

The explosions sent a series of blasts into Ujiteru from behind.

He had been right to face forward once more. His hair was roasted and the impact rattled his head, but that only disturbed his vision and did not actually blind him.

However, his frame was bent and a few wires had snapped.

“Ohhhhh!” he yelled. “I’m so damn stroooooooooooooooooong!”

In an instant, all the previously-fired shields were detonated. That was a total of 32. They were all a good distance away, but with that many blasts...

“...!”

The impacts cracked his frame and just about blew his arms off in random directions. However...

“Surviving this makes me so damn coooooooooooooooooooooool!!” he roared.

...Hell yeeeeeeeeeeeeeah!

It was not often that life placed you in such a predicament. The niece he had so thoroughly underestimated had just about killed him at some point, but when was that? It was unimportant, so he had forgotten.

But this did not happen often.

And it had been done by someone he had not just underestimated but had not even considered an opponent.

However...

“I enduuuuuuuuuured!”

He got through it.

The blasts, wind, and impacts had all passed the peak of their threat.

So the rest did not matter.

“Heyyyyyyy!”

He faced forward, but the enemy was not there.

“I’m baaaaaack!”

He moved forward and placed his left hand over his eyes to take a look around.

“Ohhhh!?”

Something caught on the left of his back.

Had a joint broken from those explosions?

He turned his head around to take a look and saw something behind him: the enemy.

She was behind him. She stood with her back to him and her hair fluttering in the remnants of the blast.

However, she was not simply standing there.

She held something in her hand.

It was a weapon.

It was the thick short sword made of black steel that was stabbed into his back.

She held it in both hands and she dropped her hips down.

“Let me tell you the proper greeting for times like this.”

The demon woman used her strength to transform the sword in his back into a powerful downwards strike.

Ujiteru’s left arm was severed at not just the shoulder but the very base.

His tall automaton body tilted forcefully to the right.

The released tension in the joint wires sent them snapping to the right now that the left half of his body was gone.

He bent backwards and staggered back for a few seconds, but he did not lose consciousness.

“Zdravstvuuuuuuyte!”

The doll forced his body to hop up as if lifting it out in front of his face.

And Shigenaga sent her Honjou Shields there.

To fill the gap left by his severed left half, she launched 7 ether shields.

They hit and shattered his doll frame. And...

“...!”

She fired her cannon at close range.

The doll’s body split, fragments scattered, and his struggling lower body went stiff. A whirring sound came from his hips before they rose up into his torso and....

“Kotsukakeeeeeeeeeee!”^[5]

They were destroyed.

That was all there was to it.

Shigenaga spoke quietly to the collapsed automaton.

“The word is *da svidaniya*, Houjou Ujiteru.”

The automaton lying in the rubble did not move.

His wide eyes and protruding tongue had no strength to them. They were simply there. Seeing that, Shigenaga took a breath and opened her mouth. She spoke into the windy and cloudy Odawara sky.

“Sviet Rus Representative Honjou Shigenaga. ...Houjou Representative Houjou Ujiteru has been defeated...!”

...Oh, something’s started.

Hiro thought that from the deck of the transport ship as it prepared to leave port.

She had two sign frames opened. One provided text information on Odawara and she relayed that information.

“Noriki-san, Houjou just lost a duel.”

“That’s fine,” replied the other sign frame.

But Hiro tilted her head at his bluntness.

“...It was Lord Ujiteru, you know? That idiot is strong.”

“That’s why I said it’s fine.”

“Oh.” Hiro realized what Noriki meant. “It’s fine because it wasn’t Lady Ujinao.”

“If you get it, you don’t have to say it.”

Hiro raised her eyebrows at that. And after a beat...

“I take it things are going well?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I can see that behind you.”

The screen displayed the part of Suwa Shrine’s grounds that was set up for the testing of his spell.

There had been test strike boulders there earlier.

Those stones weighed more than 10 tons and they had been lined up after they were ejected from the Suwa Shrine. But now...

“I can tell something incredible is happening.”

Those boulders were gone.

Instead, there were piles of pebbles. Instead of being split, those pieces scattered across the ground had been shattered from a blow.

“Well? Think it’ll work?”

“It isn’t perfect, but I’ll have to go with it. I also have something to prepare at

the Suwa Shrine.”

“What’s that?”

“Judge.” That upperclassman viewed her with his usual squinted eyes and raised eyebrows. “It’s something I need for my duel with Ujinao. Once I have it, I’ll be right there. ...Will I make it in time?”

“That’s up to them and you.” Hiro smiled bitterly as the information on the Odawara sign frame changed. “See? Another duel’s started! Hurry!”

“Oh, dear. One of the Houjou duels was just used up,” said the Reine des Garous while she wiped her mouth with a handkerchief in front of a café.

She had wanted to have something on her stomach before fighting, but she had gone a bit overboard with the Odawara cuisine. The next thing she knew, a few battles had begun within a few kilometers of her.

She would soon join them, but...

...Terumoto wants some of Houjou’s rights.

She was Vice Chancellor, so she wanted to give her boss what she wanted if possible. However...

“The Far Eastern flavoring is surprisingly good. The sweet soy sauce leaves your mouth a bit sticky, though.”

She sniffed the used handkerchief to enjoy this post-meal moment.

It was a nice smell.

That was partially because of the food, but also because of the handkerchief itself.

Her husband had chosen it for her.

On the night he had given it to her, she had repaid him by placing it in her mouth and licking and rubbing his body with it.

When carrying that cloth that was so permeated with his scent, she felt like she had his protection. And over the past few days, her daughter’s scent had gotten on her body and hair.

She felt like she was sharing the battlefield with her family.

But, she thought.

...Musashi and Mouri are effectively enemies here.

Mouri wanted Houjou's rights and Musashi wanted to visit Houjou's ruins.

If possible, she would like for them each to win one duel against Houjou, but one of those Houjou representatives, Ujiteru, had apparently been defeated by Sviet Rus.

Knowing who Ujiteru was, this was quite the upset for so early on.

The remaining Houjou fighters were Ujinao, Genan, and the Mouse named Kotarou.

Ujinao was in Odawara Castle, so the Reine des Garous could head there if need be. But after losing, Ujiteru would be injured.

"If Lord Ujiteru stubbornly insists on returning to the fight, he should be easier to defeat now, but this sounds like it will be a lot of trouble."

She could take him on, but as a wolf royal, she wanted to avoid finishing off an injured opponent.

But in that case, she knew which opponents to prioritize.

...The Houjou and Musashi fighters who are still going strong.

Fighting Houjou would be for Terumoto's wishes.

Fighting Musashi would also help with Terumoto's wishes. Musashi was definitely targeting Houjou, so it would help to take them out first.

Such a dangerous way of thinking, she thought with a bitter smile at herself.

Just then, she noticed someone standing in front of her.

They were clearly waiting for her.

It was one of the Musashi representatives.

"Oh?" The Reine des Garous smiled at them. "Were you thinking the same thing? ...Then I suppose we could fight here."

The other person lightly slapped their skinny chest and stood tall.

“I am a Musashi representative. I challenge you to a duel.”

Then they spoke their name.

“Hassan Furubushi. ...I will do my best.”

The Reine des Garous thought, *This is not at all what I expected.*

Afterword

That was Kyoukai Senjou no Horizon 6-B.

A lot of people have arrived between last time and this time, but before starting a war, you need to think about why you are going to fight that war.

War brings a lot of losses, so you need to gain enough from it to remain in the black once it's over. So both sides need to look past the war and think about what their profits and guarantees are.

And after looking ahead like that, you have to have a justification for the war, so war is a lot more of a pain than it looks. You can't just do it on a whim and all sorts of preparations are needed before taking action, so you need to have the public opinion on your side. It's entirely a part of politics, isn't it?

In that way, the international statements about the justifications for war and invasions are often about whoever says it first. If an international statement is not rejected, it becomes an "international fact", so powerful nations will start to think they can get away with saying some ridiculous things.

Diplomacy between nations developed during this era, but it was also an era where powerful nations could get away with insisting on whatever they wanted, so it's a tricky thing to look at.

Anyway, time for a quick chat.

"Got any good memories of your school days?"

"In elementary school, I fished for koi in the schoolyard pond during lunch."

"What kind of elementary schooler does that?"

"Well, there's a time when you want to goof off like that. ...And y'know what? When I got back to the classroom, it was empty. I assumed everyone had gone home, so I went home too. Thinking back, they were probably getting their

Japanese encephalitis vaccines. Glad I survived without immunity.”

“The immunity only lasts so long, right? Still, I’m calling you Enceph from now on.”

“Ohh, that sounds kind of Scandinavian.”

He’ll probably survive a while. Now, this time it was Glad You Came by The Wanted. Am I the only one that thinks it sounds like an Asian festival song?

Anyway, looking ahead to next time, I’m thinking: “Who had the best position?”

Wait just a while longer for Part C which will focus on the Siege of Odawara.

May 2013. A morning forecasted to be sweltering.

-Kawakami Minoru

Notes

1. ↑ Atami means “hot ocean”.
2. ↑ O from oppai which means boobs.
3. ↑ In Japanese, “ join his battle formation” sounds the same as “join his wives”.
4. ↑ In Japanese, Kali and curry are almost identical.
5. ↑ Kotsukake is a karate technique of retracting the testicles to defend against hits to the crotch.